MID-DECEMBER 1993

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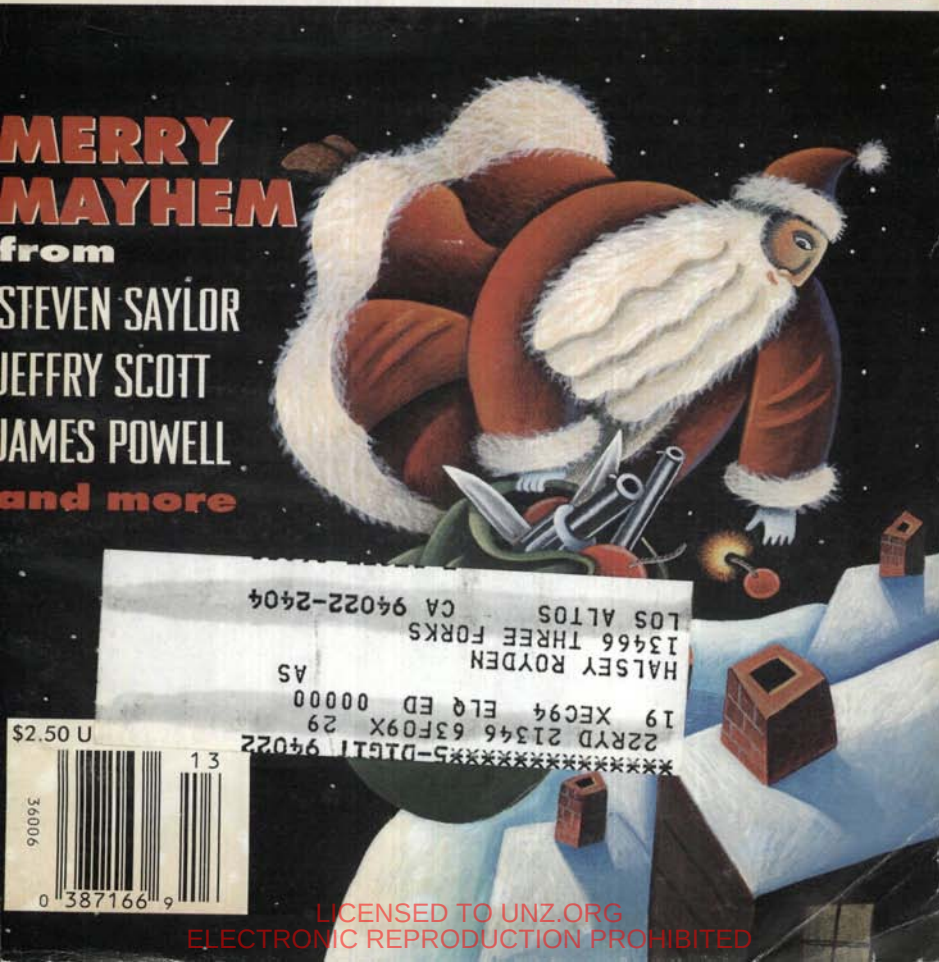
THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



MERRY MAYHEM

from

STEVEN SAYLOR

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"Writing for children is the perfect way to begin," says the author of 53 children's books. "Your ideas come right out of your own experience. And while it's still a challenge, it's the straightest possible line between you and publication —if you're qualified to seek the success this rewarding field offers."

By Alvin Tresselt, *Dean of Faculty*

IF you want to write and get published, I can't think of a better way to do it than writing books and stories for children and teenagers. Ideas flow naturally right out of your own life experience. While it's still a challenge, the odds of getting that first unforgettable check from a juvenile publisher are better than they are from just about any other kind of publisher I know.

Later on, you may get checks from other publishers. But right now, the object is to begin—to break into print—to learn the feeling of writing and selling your work and seeing your name in type. After that, you can decide if you want your writing to take another direction.

But after 40 years of editing, publishing, and teaching—and 53 books of my own—I can tell you this: You'll go a long way before you discover anything as rewarding as writing for young readers.

The soaring children's market

Your words will never sound as sweet as they do from the lips of a child reading your books and stories. And the joy of creating books and stories that reach young people is an experience you'll never have anywhere else. But that's not all. The financial rewards go far beyond most people's expectations because there's a huge market out there for writers who are trained to tap it. Over $1.5 *billion* worth of children's books are purchased annually—some 4,000 different titles—many by new authors.

And over 400 children's magazines rely on freelancers to fill each issue.

Yet two big questions bedevil nearly every would-be writer: "Am I really qualified?" and "How can I get started?"

"Am I really qualified?"

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One-on-one training with your own instructor

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This is the way I work with my students, and my fellow instructors—all of whom are experienced writers or editors—work more or less the same way.

When you're ready—at your own time

Alvin Tresselt, Dean of Faculty, was Executive Editor of Parents' Magazine Press, the first editor of *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, and a board member of the Author's Guild. His 53 books for young readers have sold over two million copies.

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to write children's books"

and your own pace—you send your assignment to me and I read it and I reread it to get everything out of it you've put into it. Then I edit your assignment with a well tempered pencil, just the way a publishing house editor would—if he had the time. I return it along with a detailed letter explaining my comments. I tell you what your strong points are, what your weaknesses are, and just what you can do to improve. It's a matter of push and pull with each assignment. You push and I pull and between us both, you learn to write.

The home of the Institute of Children's Literature, founded in 1969.

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Connie Wooldridge, Philipsburg, PA, who has sold two stories to *Highlights for Children* says, "As an at-home mother of four, I have so appreciated the way the Institute is set up: it has provided me with the professional contact and guidance I needed to get a serious start as a writer without the hassles of babysitters, long drives, and hard deadlines."

"—finally...the support and direction I needed."

"The letter with the return of my first assignment was so kind and encouraging I started to cry," writes E.D. Mahr, Hinsdale, IL. "Here, finally, was the support and direction I needed."

Ken Fleming, Staten Island, NY who reports a sale to *Cricket* Magazine says, "To know that more than 120,000 children will be reading my words gives me a feeling of great satisfaction. Thank you all for giving me so much for so little."

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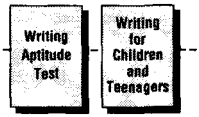

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Cover Illustration by
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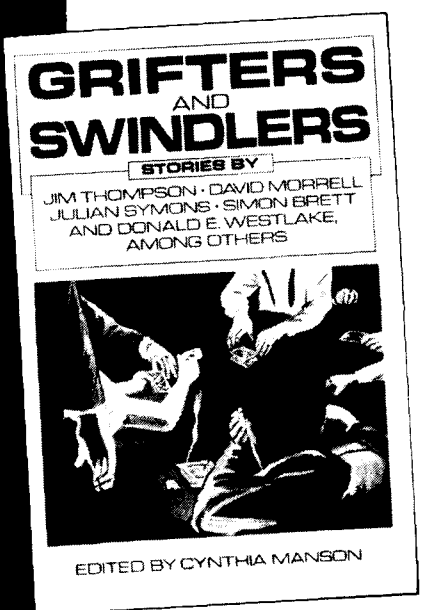
THE BEST OF THE LOWLIFE
GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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a *NEW* Gordianus story by

STEVEN SAYLOR

To ring in the holiday season, Steven Saylor takes us to ancient Rome for a celebration of the Saturnalia, a precursor to the festivities of Christmas. The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities *says of the holiday, which also fell in mid-December: "Many of the peculiar customs exhibited a remarkable resemblance to the sports of our own Christmas . . . Thus, on the Saturnalia, public gambling was allowed by the aediles, just as in the days of our ancestors the most rigid were wont to countenance card-playing on Christmas Eve . . ." As Gordianus's friend Lucius Claudius is about to find out, the relaxation of ordinary standards of conduct makes work for private eyes . . .*

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SATURNALIA SILVER

by STEVEN SAYLOR

"Gambling in the Forum! Really, Gordianus, who can countenance such behavior?" said Cicero with a slight sniff, turning his nose up at the nearby circle of men busy casting knucklebones on the paving stones.

"But Cicero, it *is* the Saturnalia," I said wearily. My adopted son Eco and I had run into him on our way to the house of my friend Lucius Claudius, and Cicero had insisted that we walk with him. He was in a testy mood, and I couldn't imagine why he wanted our company, unless it was simply to swell the ranks of his little retinue of secretaries and hangers-on as he walked through the Forum. A Roman politician can never be seen with too large an entourage,

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even if its members include a citizen of dubious respectability like myself and a thirteen-year-old mute.

The clatter of knucklebones was followed by squeals of glee and moans of defeat, then the jingling of coins changing hands. "Yes, the Saturnalia," sighed Cicero. "By tradition the city commissioners must allow such behavior in public during the midwinter festival, and Roman traditions are always to be revered. Still, it pains me to see such demeaning activity here in the very heart of the city."

I shrugged. "I see men gambling in public all the time in the Subura."

"Yes, in the Subura," he said, his polished orator's voice dripping disdain for the precinct where I lived, "but not here in the Forum!"

From nowhere, a group of drunken revelers appeared and went careening through the midst of Cicero's retinue. The revelers whirled about, making the hems of their loose gowns spin above their knees. With their forefingers they raised their felt skullcaps off their heads and spun them in the air, making blurs of red, blue, and green. In the midst of the celebrants, a hunchback had been raised in the air, dressed like old King Numa in a bright yellow gown with a papyrus crown atop his head. He nodded tipsily, squirting wine into his lips from a wineskin in one hand while with his other he waved a gnarled walking stick as if it were a scepter. Eco, delighted by the spectacle, opened his mouth in a silent laugh and clapped his hands, but Cicero was not amused.

"Surely the Saturnalia is my least favorite of festivals, no matter how wise our ancestors were to establish it," he grumbled. "All this drunken revelry and licentiousness has no place in a sensible society. As you see, I'm wearing my toga today, as usual, no matter what custom decrees for the holiday. No loose gown for me, thank you. Men whirling about to show off their naked legs, indeed! Loose clothing leads to loose morals. A toga keeps a man all in one piece, if you take my meaning." He squared his shoulders and shook his elbows slightly, making the folds of his toga fall into an orderly pattern, then gathered one arm to his chest to keep the folds in place. To look respectable in a toga, my father used to say, a man must have a spine of iron. The toga suited Cicero well.

He lowered his voice. "Worst of all are the liberties granted to slaves for the holiday. Yes, I give mine a day of rest and I allow them to speak their minds freely, at least within reason, but I draw the line at letting them go carousing through the streets wearing colored felt caps like free men. Imagine a day when you can't tell

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whether a stranger in the Forum is a citizen or someone else's property! The festival is consecrated to Saturn, but it might as well be Chaos! And I absolutely refuse to follow the absurd custom of allowing my slaves to wear my clothes and recline upon my dining couch while I serve them dinner!"

"But Cicero, it happens only once a year."

"Which is once too often."

"There are those who would say it's a good practice to turn things upside down every so often—to let a hunchback be a king, and set masters to wait upon their slaves. What better time for a bit of whimsy than midwinter, when the harvesting is all done, sailing ships are safely docked, the old magistrates are about to be booted out of their offices so that the new ones can take their place, and the whole Republic lets out a collective sigh of relief at having survived yet another year of corruption, greed, backstabbings, and betrayals? Why shouldn't Rome slip into some loose clothing for a few days and uncork a new wineskin?"

"You make Rome out to be a whore," said Cicero disapprovingly.

"Instead of a scowling politician with a stiff neck? I think that Rome is both, depending on which side one looks at. Don't forget, they say that the Saturnalia was established by the god Janus, and Janus has two faces."

Cicero harrumphed.

"But you do, I'm sure, observe at least one of the rites of the Saturnalia," I said, "which is the exchange of gifts with friends and family." I made this comment with no ulterior motive, only to remind him of the finer aspects of the holiday.

He stared at me gloomily, then a smile broke out across his face as if he had suddenly dropped a mask. "That I do!" he said, and clapped for one of his slaves, who brought him a small bag from which he drew a tiny object which he placed in my hand. "For you, Gordianus!" He laughed aloud at the expression of surprise on my face. "What, did you think I made you walk across the Forum with me just so I could regale you with my low opinion of the revelry? I count you as my friend, Gordianus! How could I not, after all the help you've given me since the trial of Sextus Roscius?"

Eco drew close to me and together we peered down at the tiny round object which glittered on my open palm beneath the dead-white winter sun. It seemed to be a simple silver bead flawed by some irregularity, but when I held it closer I saw that it was fashioned like a miniature chickpea—the cicer bean, from which Cicero's

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family took its name. Eco let out a noiseless gasp.

"Cicero, I'm honored!" I said. From the weight of the little thing, it had to be solid silver. Silver is the substance of choice for Saturnalia gift-giving, among those who can afford such extravagance.

"I'm giving my mother a whole necklace of them," Cicero said proudly. "I had them made last year in Athens, during my studies there."

"Well," I said, gesturing to Eco to reach inside the pouch he carried, "I have nothing to match it, I fear, only this." No man goes out during the Saturnalia without gifts to offer should the need arise, and I had given Eco a pouch to carry before we went out, containing a bundle of wax tapers. Eco handed me one, which I then held out to Cicero. It was the traditional gift of a poorer man to a man better off, and Cicero accepted it graciously.

"It's of the highest quality," I said, "from a little shop in the Street of the Candlemakers, dyed deep blue and scented with hyacinth. Though perhaps, given your feelings about the holiday, you won't be out tonight with the rest of the throng holding up your burning taper to set the Forum aglow."

"Actually, my brother Quintus is joining me for a small family celebration tonight; I'm sure we'll stay in. But I often stay up late, reading. I shall use your gift to light my way when next I ponder a scroll of law. The scent shall remind me of the sweetness of our friendship." Hearing such honey from his lips, who could doubt that young Cicero was well on his way to becoming one of the best-known orators in Rome?

Eco and I took our leave of Cicero and made our way up the Palatine Hill. Even here, in the city's poshest neighborhood, there was open gambling and drunken revelry in the streets; the only difference was that the gambling was for higher stakes and the revelers wore gowns made of finer stuff. We came to the house of my friend Lucius Claudius, who answered the door himself.

"Reduced to a door slave!" he laughed. "Would you believe, I told the slaves to take the whole day off and they took me quite seriously. Saturn alone knows where they all are or what they're up to!" With his cherry-red nose, plump cheeks, and wispy hair, Lucius Claudius was the very image of benevolence, especially with his features suffused, as they now were, with a beaming and slightly tipsy smile.

"I don't imagine they'll get very far, unless they have purses to carry them," I said.

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"Oh, but they do! I gave each one of them a purse with a few coins and a felt cap. Well, how can they enjoy themselves if they can't join in the gambling?"

I shook my head in mock disdain. "Now I wonder, Eco, what Cicero would make of our friend Lucius's reckless liberality?"

Eco took the cue at once and launched into an uncanny imperson*ation of Cicero, drawing his holiday gown about him like a toga,* throwing back his head, and wrinkling his nose. Lucius laughed so hard he began to cough, and his face turned redder than ever. At last he caught his breath and wiped tears from his eyes.

"No doubt Cicero would say that a slave owner with such a lax disposition is shirking his responsibility to maintain peace and order in society—but ask me if I care! Come, let me show you why I'm in such a good mood. The presents arrived only this morning!"

We followed him through the vestibule, across an immaculate atrium decorated with a splendid statue of Minerva, down a long hallway, and into a small, dark room at the back of the house. There was a thumping noise and a stifled curse as Lucius banged his knee against some sort of low chest set against one wall. "Light, must have light," he muttered, leaning over the chest and fiddling with the latched shutters of one of the tall, narrow windows set into the outer wall.

"Here, Master, let me do that," said a hoarse voice from the darkness. Eco gave a little jump beside me. His eyes are quite keen, but even he had not seen the owner of the voice when we entered the room.

Invisibility is a much-sought-after trait among good house slaves and appeared to be one of the skills of Lucius's right-hand man, an ancient white-haired Greek named *Stephanos who had been in* charge of running the house on the Palatine for many years. He walked with a stiff-limbed gait from window to window, unlatching the narrow shutters and pulling them open to admit cold air and bright sunshine.

Lucius muttered a word of thanks to the slave, who muttered some formula in return, but I hardly heard them. Like Eco, I stood transfixed by a sudden blaze of silver. Before our dazzled eyes, the sunlight which poured in through the windows was transformed into a white, liquid fire that shimmered, sparkled, danced, and seemed almost to laugh. I glanced at Eco and saw his wondering face lit up by lozenges of reflected light, then returned my gaze to the splendor before us.

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The piece of furniture against which Lucius had bumped his knee was a thigh-high wooden chest. In itself it was a marvelous piece of work, beautifully crafted and inlaid with bits of shell and obsidian. Spread across the hinged lid was a blood-red cloth. Laid out atop the cloth was the most stunning collection of silver objects I had ever seen.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" said Lucius.

I merely nodded, rendered as mute as Eco by the display.

"Note the ewer," said Lucius enthusiastically. "The shape—so elegant. See how the handle is in the form of a caryatid hiding her face?"

The piece was exquisite, as was the silver comb inlaid with carnelian alongside a matching silver brush, upon the back of which was an image in relief of a satyr spying on some bathing nymphs. A necklace of silver and amber was laid beside another of silver and lapis, and yet another of silver and ebony, and each had a pair of matching earrings and matching bracelets. Two silver cups were embossed with hunting scenes around the base, while another pair of cups were decorated with a geometrical design of Greek influence.

Most impressive of all, if only for its size, was a great silver plate as wide as a man's forearm. Its border was a circle of embossed acanthus leaves, while in the center the spirit of mirth, Silenus, ran riot amid a dizzying array of satyrs, fauns, and nymphs. When Lucius looked away for a moment, Eco pointed to the face of Silenus and then nodded toward our host. I saw what he meant; while all images of Silenus might be said to bear a family resemblance to Lucius Claudius, sharing as they do a plump, round face atop a plump, round body, this depiction of Silenus was too exactly like Lucius to be anything but a portrait.

"You must have had these pieces made especially for you," I said.

"Why yes, I commissioned a shop of artisans down on the Street of the Silversmiths. These pieces are proof, I think, that one can find just as high a quality of workmanship here in Rome as among pieces imported from Alexandria and the East."

"Yes," I agreed, "provided one has the purse to pay for it."

"Well, it *was* a bit extravagant," Lucius admitted, "but the raw silver comes from Spain, instead of the East, which helps to bring down the price. Anyway, it'll be worth the expense to see the look on their faces when my cousins see what I'm giving them for the Saturnalia. Silver is traditionally what one gives, of course—"

"If one can afford it," I muttered.

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"—but in the past I'm afraid some of my relatives have proclaimed me a bit of a miser. Well, I have no wife or child, so I suppose I have no training in lavishing my fortunes on those around me, and it's sometimes hard to catch the holiday spirit when one is a bachelor. But not this year—this year I've gone all out, as you can see."

"You have indeed," I agreed, thinking that even jaded, wealthy patricians like those of the Claudian clan would have to be impressed with Lucius's generosity.

Lucius stood for a moment gazing upon the various vessels and pieces of jewelry, then turned to the slave who lingered close by. "But Stephanos, what's this? What are you doing skulking about here in the dark on such a splendid day? You should be out cavorting with the others."

"Cavorting, Master?" said the wrinkled slave drily, in such a way as to indicate that the likelihood of his doing such a thing was quite remote.

"Well, you know what I mean—you should be out enjoying yourself."

"I enjoy myself quite well enough here, Master."

"Well, amusing yourself, then."

"I assure you, I'm just as capable of amusing myself here as anywhere else," said Stephanos, his voice belying the absurdity of the thought that he could be amused under any circumstances.

"Very well," laughed Lucius, "have it your way, Stephanos. That, after all, is the point of the holiday."

Lucius paused once again before the chest and lovingly fingered the ewer he had first pointed out, and to which he seemed especially attached. Then he invited us to join him in the atrium for a cup of watered wine, and led the way.

"Much watered, in Eco's case," I said, as Lucius served us from a simple silver ewer that was brimming with frothy purple wine. Eco frowned but held out his cup, willing to take what he could get. From past experience I knew that Lucius kept a stock of only the finest vintages, and for myself I requested very little water, so as to preserve the fine bouquet at full strength. For a man so used to being waited on, Lucius did a creditable job of serving us, then served himself and sat down to join us.

"Considering how hard you work, Gordianus, I suppose you must enjoy the leisure of the holiday immensely."

"Actually, I often find myself busier on festival days than at other times."

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"Really?"

"Crime takes no holidays," I said. "Or more accurately: Crime enjoys the holidays, immensely. You have no idea how many thefts and murders occur on festival days—not to mention all the indiscretions and infidelities."

"I wonder why?"

I shrugged. "The normal constraints of society are loosened; people find themselves more open to temptation and do things they ordinarily wouldn't, for all sorts of reasons—for greed, for spite, or simply for a joke. Families are gathered together, whether they like one another or not; that can lead to a few heads being bashed in while no one's looking. And the expenses of entertaining can drive even a wealthy man to deeds of desperation. As for those already of a criminal disposition, consider the advantages to their trade during the festivals, when people let down their guard and stupefy themselves with too much food and wine. Oh yes, a Roman holiday is an invitation to crime, and they are often my busiest days of the year."

"Then I count myself lucky to have your company, Gordianus!" said Lucius, raising his cup.

At that moment we heard the front door open, followed by loud voices from the vestibule, and then a pair of young slaves came tripping into the atrium. Their cheeks were ruddy from the cold, almost as red as the felt caps on their heads. Their eyes were bleary from drinking, but they straightened considerably at the sight of their master.

"Cleon, Zoticus, I trust that you're enjoying yourselves?" called Lucius heartily.

Cleon, who was slender and blond, suddenly stiffened, not sure how to react, while his companion, who was stocky and dark, abruptly sputtered with laughter and ran with a whoop from the atrium toward the back of the house.

"Yes, Master, very much, Master," said Cleon finally. He shifted from foot to foot, as if waiting to be dismissed. Finally Lucius picked up a crust of bread and threw it at the boy. "Go on, get out!" he laughed. Cleon departed quickly, looking confused and stricken.

We drank in silence for a while, enjoying the wine. "You certainly strive for informality, Lucius," I remarked wryly, "even when it makes the poor slave a bit uncomfortable."

"That one's new in the household and doesn't understand: It's the Saturnalia!" said Lucius grandly. He had just finished his second cup of wine and was reaching to pour himself another. I turned to

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Eco, expecting him to wink at me in amusement, but instead he seemed distracted and was looking toward the back of the house.

"And will you go as far as to wait upon your slaves at dinner?" I asked, remembering how Cicero had balked at performing such a reversal.

"Well, no—after all, Gordianus, there are so very many of them in the household and only one of me! I'll already be worn out from visiting with my cousins this afternoon and handing out my presents. But I do let the slaves recline upon the dining couches as if they were guests and take turns serving each other, while I take my meal in my bedchamber. They always seem to enjoy the little charade, judging from all the noise they make. And you? Will you play servant to your household slaves at dinner?"

"There are only two of them."

"Ah yes, your bodyguard, that lumbering Belbo, and of course, your Egyptian concubine, the beautiful Bethesda. What man would refuse to wait upon her?" Lucius sighed, and then shivered. He has always been smitten with Bethesda, and more than a little intimidated by her.

"Eco and I shall be going home to prepare their dinner immediately after we take our leave of you," I said, "and tonight, before the people mass in the streets with their lit tapers, Eco and I shall serve the two of them dinner while they recline upon our couches."

"Delicious! I should come to watch!"

"Only if you're willing to carry a tray like the other citizens in the house."

"Well . . ."

At that moment, from the corner of my eye, I saw Eco jerk his head toward the back of the house with a sudden, birdlike motion. His hearing can be quite acute, and so it was that he heard the approach of the young slave before Lucius or I did. A moment later Cleon came running into the atrium with a look of shock and dismay on his face. He opened his mouth but choked on the words.

"Well, Cleon, what is it?" said Lucius, wrinkling his fleshy brow.

"Something terrible, Master!"

"Yes?"

"It's old Stephanos, Master—"

"Yes, yes, spit it out."

Cleon wrung his hands and made a face. "Please, Master, come see for yourself!"

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"Now, what could be so terrible that the slave can't even utter it?" said Lucius, making light of the matter as he laboriously rose from his chair. "Come, Gordianus, it's probably a matter for you!" he said, laughing.

But all laughter ceased when we followed young Cleon into the room where Lucius had shown us his silver. All the windows were shuttered except one close by the chest. By the cold light which entered we surveyed the disaster which had tied Cleon's tongue. The red cloth was still thrown over the chest, but now it was all askew, and every piece of silver had vanished. In front of the chest, on the floor, the old slave Stephanos lay unmoving on his side with his arms raised to his chest. His forehead was dented with a bloody gash, and though his eyes were wide open, I had seen enough dead men to know that Stephanos had departed from the service of Lucius Claudius forever.

"By Hercules, what's happened?" gasped Lucius. "The silver! And Stephanos! Is he—?"

Eco knelt down to feel for a pulse, and put his ear to the dead slave's parted lips. He looked up at us and shook his head gravely.

"But what happened?" cried Lucius. "Cleon, what do you know about this?"

"Nothing, Master! I came into the room and found it exactly as it is now, and then came to you right away."

"And Zoticus," said Lucius darkly. "Where is he?"

"I don't know, Master."

"What do you mean? You came together."

"Yes, but I had to relieve myself, so I went to the privy at the other corner of the house. Afterwards I went looking for Zoticus, but I couldn't find him."

"Well, go and find him now!" blustered Lucius.

Cleon meekly turned to leave. "No, wait," I said. "It seems to me that there's no hurry to find Zoticus, if indeed he's still in the house. I think it might be more interesting to discover why you happened to come into this room at all, Cleon."

"I was looking for Zoticus, as I said." He dropped his eyes.

"But why here? This is one of your master's private rooms. I shouldn't think anyone is supposed to come in here except a slave of Stephanos's rank, or perhaps a cleaning girl. Why were you looking for Zoticus here, Cleon?"

"I—I thought I heard a noise."

"What sort of noise?"

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Cleon made a pained face. "I thought I heard someone . . . laughing."

Eco suddenly clapped his hands for our attention and nodded vigorously.

"What are you saying, Eco, that you heard this laughter too?"

He nodded, and made a motion with his hands to indicate that from the atrium it had sounded faint and far away.

"The laughter came from this room, Cleon?"

"I thought so. First the laughter, and then . . . then a kind of rattling noise, and a banging, or a thud, not very loud."

I looked at Eco, who pursed his lips ambivalently and shrugged. He too, seated in the atrium, had heard something from the back of the house, but the sound had been indistinct.

"Was it Zoticus laughing?" I asked.

"I suppose so," said Cleon dubiously.

"Come now, was it Zoticus or not? Surely you're familiar with his laughter—you were both laughing when you came in from the street awhile ago."

"It didn't sound like Zoticus, but I suppose it must have been, unless there's someone else in the house."

"There's no one," said Lucius. "I'm certain of that."

"Someone could have come in," I said, stepping toward the open shutters. "Curious—this latch seems to have snapped. Was it broken before?"

"I don't think so," said Lucius.

"Where does the window lead?"

"To a small garden."

"And what surrounds the garden?"

"The house on three sides, and a wall on the other."

"And on the other side of the wall?"

"The street. Oh dear, I see what you mean. Yes, I suppose someone young and agile enough could have scaled the wall and broken into the house."

"Could the same wall be scaled from this side as well?"

"I suppose."

"Even by a man with a bag full of silver over his shoulder?"

"Gordianus, you don't think that Zoticus—"

"I hope not, for his sake, but stranger things have happened when a slave is given a small taste of freedom, the experience of spending a few coins, and a little too much wine."

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"Merciful Fortune," breathed Lucius. "The silver!" He walked to the chest and reached out as if to touch phantom vessels where the silver had vanished. "The ewer, the jewelry, the cups—all gone!"

"There's no sign of a weapon," I said, looking about the room. "Perhaps one of the missing pieces was used to strike that blow to Stephanos's head. Something with a rather straight, hard edge, by the look of the wound. Perhaps the plate . . ."

"What a horrid idea! Poor Stephanos." Lucius rested his hands on the lid of the chest and suddenly drew back with a gasp of horror. He held up his hand and I saw that the palm was smeared with blood.

"Where did that come from?" I said.

"The cloth atop the chest. It's hard to see in this light, the cloth being red, but there's a spot that's wet with blood."

"Here, it's been pushed all askew. Let's put it as it was before." We straightened the cloth and discovered that the bloody spot was right above the edge of the top of the chest.

"As if he hit his forehead on the hard wood," said Lucius.

"Yes, as if he fell—or was pushed," I said.

Cleon cleared his throat. "Master, should I go and look for Zoticus now?"

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "We shall look for him together."

A quick search of the slaves' quarters revealed that Zoticus was not in the house. We returned to the pilfered treasure room.

"Should I go search for Zoticus in the streets, Master?" The quaver in Cleon's voice indicated that he was well aware of the delicacy of his position. If Zoticus had committed murder and theft, was it not likely that his friend Cleon had been a partner in the scheme? Even if Cleon was entirely innocent, the testimony of slaves is by tradition and law extracted through torture; if the silver was not retrieved and the matter resolved quickly, Cleon was likely to face some ugly torments. My friend Lucius has a good heart, but he comes from a very old patrician family, after all, and the patricians of Rome didn't get to be where they are today by being altruistic or squeamish, especially in handling their property, human or otherwise.

Lucius dismissed Cleon to his quarters and then turned to me. "Gordianus, what shall I do?" he moaned, at that moment not sounding very patrician at all.

"Keep Cleon here, of course. Out on his own he might panic and get some mad idea about running off, and that always ends badly for a slave. Besides, he just might be guilty of conspiring to steal

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your silver," I added under my breath. "I also suggest you hire some strong-arm men to go round up Zoticus, if they can find him."

"And if he hasn't got the silver on him?"

"Then it's up to you to decide how to go about obtaining the truth from him."

"What if he protests his innocence?"

"I suppose it's possible that some outsider came over the wall and stole your silver. Another of your slaves, perhaps, or someone from the Street of the Silversmiths who would have known about your recent purchases. But find Zoticus first and find out what he knows."

Eco, who had been looking pensive for some time, suddenly demanded my attention. He pointed at the corpse of Stephanos and then performed a mime, smiling stupidly and pretending to laugh.

Lucius was taken aback. "Really, there's nothing funny about it!"

"No, Lucius, you misunderstand. Are you saying, Eco, that it was Stephanos whom you heard laughing?"

Eco nodded, in such a way as to indicate that he had been debating his judgment of the matter and had finally made up his mind about it.

"Stephanos, laughing?" said Lucius, in the same tone he might have used if Eco had indicated that he had seen Stephanos breathing fire or juggling his eyeballs.

"He did seem a rather dour fellow," I agreed, giving Eco a sceptical look. "And if it was Stephanos who laughed, then why didn't Cleon say so?"

"Probably because he had never heard Stephanos laugh before," said Lucius. "I don't think I ever heard such a thing." He looked down at the corpse with a puzzled expression. "Are you sure it was Stephanos you heard laughing, Eco?"

Eco crossed his arms and nodded gravely. He had made up his mind.

"Ah well, perhaps we'll never know for sure," I said, walking toward the door.

"You're not staying to help me, Gordianus?"

"Alas, Lucius Claudius, I must take my leave for now. There's a dinner to be prepared, and a concubine to be served."

Eco and I managed to get home relatively unscathed. A group of giggling prostitutes impeded our progress for a while by dancing in a ring around us, another King Numa carried aloft in a litter poured a cup of wine over my head, and a drunken gladiator vomited on

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one of Eco's shoes, but the trip from the Palatine to the Subura was otherwise uneventful.

The fare we prepared for dinner was simple, as suited my talents. Even so, Bethesda seemed barely able to keep out of the kitchen. Every so often she peered through the doorway wearing a sceptical frown and shaking her head, as if the very way I held a knife betrayed my utter incompetence in matters culinary.

At last, as the winter sun was beginning to sink into the west, Eco and I emerged from the kitchen to find Bethesda and Belbo comfortably ensconced on the dining couches normally reserved for ourselves. Eco pulled up the little dining tables while I fetched the various courses—a lentil soup, a millet porridge with ground lamb, an egg pudding with honey and pine nuts.

Belbo seemed content with his meal, but then Belbo enjoys every meal, so long as there's enough of it. He smacked his lips, ate with his fingers, and laughed out loud at the novelty of sending his young master Eco to fetch more wine, accepting the tradition of reversing roles as a lark. Bethesda, on the other hand, approached each dish with an air of cool detachment. As always, her typically aloof demeanor masked the true depth of what was going on inside her, which I suspected was as complex and subtle as the most exquisite ragout. Partly she was sceptical of my cooking, partly she enjoyed the novelty of being served and the pretense of being a Roman matron, and partly she wished to hide any outward sign of her enjoyment because, ah well, because Bethesda is Bethesda.

She did, however, deign to compliment me on the egg pudding, for which I took a bow.

"And how was your day, Master?" she asked casually, settling back on the couch. I stood close by, my arms clasped deferentially behind my back. In her imagination, was I reduced to a slave—or worse, to a husband?

I recounted to her the day's events, as slaves are often called upon to do by their masters at the end of the day. Bethesda listened abstractedly, running her hands through her luxurious black hair and tapping her full red lips. When I described my encounter with Cicero, her dark eyes flashed, for she has always been suspicious of any man who has a greater appetite for books than for women or food; when I told her I had called on Lucius Claudius she smiled, for she knows how susceptible he is to her beauty; when I told her of Stephanos's demise and the disappearance of the silver, she became deeply pensive. She leaned forward to rest her chin on her hand and

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it suddenly occurred to me that she was very nearly performing a parody of me.

After I had explained the unfortunate events, she asked me to explain them again, then called on Eco, who had been performing some childish hand-slapping game with Belbo, to come over and clarify some aspects of the story. Again, as he had at Lucius's house, he insisted that it was Stephanos whom he had heard laughing.

"Master," said Bethesda thoughtfully, "will this slave Cleon be tortured?"

I sighed. "Possibly. If Lucius is unable to recover the silver, he may lose his head—Lucius, I mean, though Cleon could lose his head as well, literally."

"And if Zoticus is found without the silver, protesting his innocence?"

"He will almost certainly be tortured," I said. "Lucius would lose face with his family and his colleagues if he were to allow himself to be duped by a slave."

"Duped by a slave," murmured Bethesda thoughtfully, nodding. Then she shook her head and put on her most imperious expression. "Master, you were there! How could you not have seen the truth?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were drinking the wine of Lucius Claudius straight, weren't you? It must have addled your judgment."

Many liberties are allowed to slaves on the Saturnalia, but this was too much! "Bethesda! I demand—"

"We must go to the house of Lucius Claudius at once!" Bethesda sprang to her feet and ran to fetch herself a cloak. Eco looked at me for direction. I shrugged. "Fetch your cloak, Eco, and mine as well; the night may be chilly. You might as well come along too, Belbo, if you can manage to lift yourself off that couch. The streets will be wild tonight."

I will not recount the madness of crossing Rome on the night of the Saturnalia. Suffice it to say that on certain stretches of the journey I was very glad to have Belbo with us; his hulking presence alone was usually enough to clear a way through the raucous throng. When we at last rapped upon Lucius's door, it was once again answered by the master of the house.

"Gordianus! Oh, I'm glad to see you. This day only becomes worse and worse. Oh, and Eco, and Belbo—and Bethesda!" His voice broke a little as he said her name and his eyes grew wider. He blushed, if

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it was possible for his florid face to turn a brighter red.

"I took your advice," he said, leading us into the atrium, which was now warmed by a great brazier. The statue of Minerva looked down upon the fire, her wise countenance a flickering study in shadow and light. "I hired men to search for Zoticus. They found him quickly enough, as drunk as a satyr and gambling in the street outside a brothel in the Subura—trying to win enough to go inside, he says."

"And the silver?"

"No sign of it. Zoticus swears that he never saw the silver or even knew that it existed. He says he slipped out of the back of the house through a window in the slaves' quarters. He says that Cleon was boring him and he wanted to go out alone."

"Do you believe him?"

Lucius clutched his head. "Oh, I don't know what to believe. All I know is that Zoticus and Cleon came in, Zoticus slipped out, and at some point in between Stephanos was killed and the silver was taken. I just want the silver back! My cousins came calling today, and I had nothing to give them. Of course I didn't want to explain the situation; I told them my presents were late and I'd come to see them tomorrow. Gordianus, I don't want to torture the young men, but what else can I do?"

"You can take me to the room where you kept the silver," said Bethesda, stepping forward and slipping off her cloak, which she tossed onto a nearby chair. Her cascade of black hair glittered with flashes of blue and purple in the light of the flaming brazier. Her face was impassive and her eyes were steadily fixed on Lucius Claudius, who blinked under her gaze. I quailed a bit myself, looking at her in the firelight, for while she wore her hair down, like a slave, and was dressed in a simple slavewoman's gown, her face had the same compelling majesty as the marble face of the goddess who looked down on us.

Bethesda kept her gaze on Lucius, who reached up to dab at a bead of sweat from his forehead. The brazier was hot, but not that hot. "Of course," he said, "though there's nothing to see now. I had the body of Stephanos removed to another room . . ." His voice trailed off as he turned and led the way to the back of the house, taking a lamp from a sconce on the wall to light the way.

Under the lamp's flickering light, the room seemed very empty and slightly eerie. The shutters were closed and the bloodstained cloth had been removed from the top of the chest.

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"Which shutters were open when you found Stephanos dead?" said Bethesda.

"Th-these," said Lucius with a slight stutter. At his touch they parted. "The latch seems to be broken," he explained, trying to push them shut again.

"Broken, because the shutters were not opened by the latch, but forced," said Bethesda.

"Yes, we figured that out this morning," he said. "They must have been pushed open from outside. Some outsider forced his way in—"

"I think not," said Bethesda. "What if one were to seize the top of the shutters and pull them open, like so." At another window she wrenched the shutters open, breaking the little latch at the middle.

"But why would anyone do that?" asked Lucius.

I parted my lips and drew in a breath, beginning to see what Bethesda had in mind. I almost spoke, but caught myself. The idea was hers, after all, and I would let her reveal it.

"The slave Cleon said he heard first laughter, then a rattling noise, then a banging. The laughter, according to Eco, came from Stephanos."

Lucius shook his head. "That's hard to imagine."

"Because you never heard Stephanos laugh? I can tell you why: because he laughed only behind your back. Ask some of the slaves who have been here longer than Cleon, and see what they tell you."

"How can you know this?" protested Lucius.

"The man ran your household, did he not? He was your chief slave here in Rome. Believe me, from time to time he laughed at you behind your back." Lucius seemed taken aback at such an idea, but Bethesda was not to be argued with. "As for the rattling Cleon heard, you heard the same noise just now, when I wrenched open those shutters. Then Cleon heard a banging, a thud—that was the sound of Stephanos's head striking the hard edge of the chest." She winced. "Then he fell to the ground, here I should think, clutching his chest and bleeding from his head." She pointed to the very spot where we had found Stephanos. "But the most significant sound was the one that *no one heard*—the clanging of silver, which would surely have made a considerable noise if anyone had hurriedly stuffed all the vessels into a bag and then run off with it."

"But what does this all mean?" said Lucius.

"It means that your wooden-faced slave, whom you believed to have no sense of humor, had his own way of celebrating the Saturnalia this year. Stephanos pulled a little joke on you in secret—then

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laughed out loud at his own impertinence. But he laughed too hard. Stephanos was very old, wasn't he? Old slaves have weak hearts. When their hearts fail, they are likely to fall and reach for anything to support them." She seized the top of the shutters and jerked them open. "These were a poor support. He fell and struck his head, and then kept falling to the floor. Was it the blow that killed him, or his heart? Who can say?"

"But the silver!" demanded Lucius. "Where is it?"

"Where Stephanos carefully and silently hid it away, thinking to give his master a fright."

I held my breath as Bethesda opened the lid of the chest; what if she were wrong? But there, scattered atop some embroidered coverlets and glittering beneath the lamplight, were all the vessels and necklaces and bangles which Lucius had shown us that morning.

Lucius gasped and looked as if he might faint from relief. "But I still can't believe it," he finally said. "Stephanos never pulled such a prank before!"

"Oh, did he not?" said Bethesda. "Slaves pull such jokes all the time, Lucius Claudius. The point of such pranks is not that their masters should find out and feel foolish, for then the impertinent slave would be punished. No, the point is that the master should never even realize that he's been made the butt of a joke. Stephanos was probably planning to be out in the street enjoying himself when you found the silver missing. He would have let you rush about in a panic for a while, then he would have come home, and when you frantically told him the silver was missing, he would have shown it to you in the trunk."

"But I would have been furious."

"All the better to amuse Stephanos. For when you asked him why he had put the silver there, he would have said that you told him to and that he was only following your orders."

"But I never gave him such instructions!"

" 'Ah, but you did, Master,' he would have said, shaking his head at your absent-mindedness, and with his stern, humorless expression, you would have had no choice but to believe him. Think back, Lucius Claudius, and I suspect that you may remember other occasions when you found yourself in a fix and Stephanos was constrained to point out that it was due to your own foolishness."

"Well, now that you mention it . . ." said Lucius, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

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"And all the while Stephanos was having a laugh at you behind your back," said Bethesda.

I shook my head. "I should have seen the truth when I was here earlier," I said ruefully.

"Nonsense," said Bethesda. "You are wise in the ways of the world, Master, but you can never know the secret workings of a slave's mind, for you have never been one." She shrugged. "When you told me the story, I saw the truth at once. I did not have to know Stephanos to know how his mind worked; there is a way of looking at the world common to all slaves, I think."

I nodded and then stiffened a bit. "Does this mean that sometimes, when I can't find something, or when I distinctly remember giving you an order but you convince me that it slipped my mind . . ."

Bethesda smiled ever so slightly, as the goddess of wisdom might smile when contemplating a secret joke too rich for mere mortals.

Later that night we joined the throng in the Forum, holding up our wax tapers so that the great public squares and the looming facades of the temples were illuminated by thousands and thousands of flickering lights. Lucius came with us and joined in the joyful chanting of "Yo, yo, Saturnalia!" which echoed and boomed about the Forum. From the giddy smile on his face, I could see that he had regained his good humor. Bethesda smiled too, and why not? On her wrist, glittering like a circle of liquid fire beneath the flicker of her taper, was a bracelet of silver and ebony, the Saturnalia gift of a grateful admirer.

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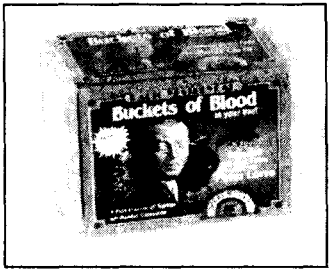

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FORCED MOVES

by GEORGE C. CHESBRO

"What do you think of the game of chess in general, and chess players in particular?" Garth asked, certain that Jeffrey Bond's dark eyes would have glazed over if not for the fact that one of the world's top players had tumbled off the center span of the Tappan Zee Bridge one week before. Indifference to the game was hardly the attitude of the chess players present in the Russian Orthodox church where he had gone that morning, and he had felt their gazes on him as, wanting to be noticed with the object he carried, he had entered the sanctuary just before the service had started, walked slowly down the center aisle, and squeezed into a pew near the front.

Garth had remained seated after the service, conducted in German, was over, waiting to see what, if anything, would happen, and who, if anyone, would approach him. All seven of the players, five men and two women, who were members of both the church and the Cairn Chess Club, came down to where he sat. Although he knew all of them by name, and even considered three of them his friends, none spoke to him. They paused briefly in the aisle beside his pew, glanced down at the blue canvas chess carrying-case in his lap,

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nodded curtly, then passed out of the sanctuary through a door to the right of the altar.

"You're Garth Frederickson, aren't you?"

Garth turned in his seat, then rose when he saw Bishop Vladimir Hromadka standing in the aisle just behind him. The man's thin, finely chiseled features were impassive, but his eyes, as black as his robe, gleamed with what Garth thought might be suspicion, or perhaps just curiosity.

"Good morning, Father. I was hoping to talk with you, but I was waiting until after you'd greeted your parishioners."

"My assistant pastor is at the door greeting our parishioners; I thought I would come to greet you. You are an important visitor, Mr. Frederickson."

"Why do you say that, Father?"

"You and your brother are very famous private investigators."

"My brother's the famous one; I'm mostly famous for being his brother."

"You're overly modest; I've heard a great deal about both of you." The priest paused, smiled thinly, then added, "One of the things I've heard is that you are nonbelievers."

"You have a beautiful church here, Father. And it was a lovely service; I enjoyed it very much."

Bishop Vladimir Hromadka cocked his head to one side slightly, studying the other man with the long, thinning, wheat-colored hair and bright, soulful brown eyes that revealed so little, then nodded toward the chess carrying-case in Garth's hand. "That seems a rather odd item to bring with you to church."

"I was hoping you would agree to help me analyze a game."

"I wouldn't be much help to you in analyzing your game, Mr. Frederickson. I do play, but I am very weak."

"I've learned that when an Eastern European chess player describes himself as weak, it usually means that he's just shy of his last IM norm."

"No. I really am very weak—average, if you will. My rating is just over fifteen hundred."

Garth looked into the other man's eyes, believed him; he sensed no deceit or evasiveness. More important, he sensed that the man was not a killer, and he began to feel the stirrings of doubt. "Well, I'm pleased to have met you, Father, and I won't take up any more of your time. It seems I've come to the wrong place for what I want."

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"That remains to be seen," the priest replied evenly. "I assume the game you want to analyze is the one you played with Uwe Essen last Monday night?"

"Yes."

"I understand that you won."

"Yes."

"Congratulations."

"Under the circumstances, I'm not sure it would be appropriate to accept any congratulations."

"Perhaps not. But in any case, it is Leonid and our other six members of your club who must help you analyze your game. They often come here to play and study during the week, and there is a room downstairs with a demonstration board. They are waiting for you there now. I think I'll come along. I'm very interested in the game; perhaps I'll learn something."

Perhaps they would both learn something, Garth thought, feeling his heartbeat quicken as he followed the priest out of the sanctuary, along a wide corridor, and down a flight of stairs to the lower level. He was now certain that he had been right in coming here, for all seven players would not now be waiting for him if they did not have something to reveal to him, and the rising tension he felt was not unlike that he always experienced before each round in a tournament, an emotional and physical reaction he would be hard-pressed to communicate to Jeffrey Bond that evening when the chief of the Cairn Police Department asked, "Does this have something to do with the guy who took a header off the TZ last week?"

"Yes," Garth replied. "Except maybe he didn't jump; maybe he was pushed, or maybe his back and neck were broken before he ever hit the water."

The police chief was leaning back in his swivel chair, feet up on his desk, sipping at the carton of coffee Garth had brought him. Now he took his feet off the desk and sat up straight, setting aside the coffee. "When my friend Garth Frederickson talks murder, I listen."

"I haven't mentioned murder, Jeff. I just said it was possible."

"Hell, anything's possible. Now I assume you're going to tell me why that possibility even occurred to you? You know, he's not the first person to jump off that bridge."

"Before I can tell you why the thought occurred to me, I have to explain a few things, and then show you something. Do you play chess?"

"No. You?"

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"Yes."

"Somehow that surprises me."

"Why?"

The burly black man shrugged his broad shoulders, rubbed his crooked nose. "I don't know. It's something I can see your smart little brother doing, because he does all sorts of strange things. But you? It just seems like chess is an egghead game played mostly by a bunch of nerdy weirdos."

Garth smiled. "What if I were to tell you that chess is an extremely violent game?"

"I'd say you were putting me on."

"Well, I wouldn't want you to think that. One thing you should know is that Cairn has become something of a hot area in the chess world, and the reason is that a lot of Eastern Europeans have emigrated here—mostly because of the Russian Orthodox church down on River Road, and the cultural support systems it provides. Chess is to Eastern Europeans what baseball is to Americans; most of their kids start learning chess from their parents before they can walk. There are a lot of very strong chess players who now live in Cairn; because of them, a team from Cairn High School won the National Junior Championship last year, and a team from my club placed third in the Eastern Amateur Championship the year before that."

"The guy who jumped off the bridge was supposed to be a hotshot chess player."

"Indeed. He was a GM—a Grand Master."

"That sounds like a pretty fancy title."

"It's a title earned with consistent, top-level play, and conferred by an international governing body on only the strongest players. Uwe Essen was among the strongest of the strong; he was ranked twelfth in the world."

"He played at your club?"

"No. For the most part, Grand Masters outside of New York City don't hang out with ordinary mortals in local chess clubs. They're paid expenses and appearance fees to lend their presence in major tournaments around the world, where they play for the big money. We'd been trying to get Uwe Essen to just show up at our club for the past two years, ever since he moved to Cairn. We offered to pay him to deliver a lecture, or, even better, give a simultaneous exhibition."

"What's a simultaneous exhibition?"

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"He'd play all of the members of the club at the same time; tables would be arranged in a circle, each player would sit on the outside at a board, and he would walk around the inside, going from board to board and moving in response to our moves."

"One guy would play *all* of you?"

"Right—but any club outside of the city would be easy pickings for a Grand Master. At our level of strength, a Grand Master would only have to glance at each board to understand the position immediately and know what had to be done to win. Anyway, Essen ignored us, never answered our letters or returned our calls—until last week. On Sunday night he called our president to say that he would agree to do a simultaneous on Monday night, which is when our club meets."

Jeffrey Bond was silent for some time, studying Garth as he sipped his coffee. Finally he grunted, said, "A guy ignores you for two years, then abruptly agrees to give you one of those simultaneous exhibitions, after which he jumps off the Tappan Zee Bridge. That is odd."

"It isn't the only thing that happened that night that was odd."

"What else happened?"

"I beat him. Actually, it's more accurate to say that he insisted on losing to me."

The police chief cocked his head to one side, ran his right hand through his thick, wiry gray hair. "You beat him," he said in a quizzical tone. "Good for you, and so what?"

"It never should have happened."

"Why not? You got lucky."

"Listen to me very carefully, Jeff, because before I leave I want to be absolutely certain you've received the message I came to deliver. There is no luck in chess—only skill, knowledge, patience, and courage. It's one of the three fields of human endeavor, along with music and mathematics, that produces prodigies. You can study for a lifetime, but you'll never reach the highest level of play unless you have the genes—the right wiring, if you will. You mentioned my brother, who does do very strange things, who does play chess, and who happens to be a very strong player. He plays at Master-level strength, and could probably be an International Master if he had the time and inclination, which he doesn't, to study more, and then spend two or three years traveling around the world to play in the required major tournaments. If he'd come up from New York last Monday night, he might—*might*—have beaten Essen in that situa-

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tion; it's more likely he'd have gotten a draw. The strongest players in our club are Eastern European, and one or two of them might have gotten draws playing against Essen in a simultaneous—but none of them showed up. That left twenty-seven of us, none rated beyond Expert. I'm a B-class player—above-average strength, but nowhere near even an Expert, and light years below Essen in strength. Essen didn't just beat everybody else that night, he crushed them—everyone but me. The odds against my winning that game were about the same as for a Little League player with a plastic bat hitting a home run in Yankee Stadium off Nolan Ryan."

"Come on, Garth; now you're exaggerating."

"Not by much," Garth said as he zipped open his chess case, took out one of the two sheets of paper inside, and placed it on the desk in front of his friend.

"What the hell is that?" the police chief asked, frowning slightly as he studied the letter and number markings on the paper.

"It's a chess scoresheet, written in what's called algebraic notation. In chess, it's possible to record every move that's made, so any game can be reconstructed, played over again, and analyzed. Games are classified by the order of opening moves, and these opening sequences have names—like Ruy Lopez, King's Indian Defense, and so on. One of the first things a beginner is taught is to identify types of games and strategy by these opening moves."

"That's Essen's signature at the bottom?"

"Right. I kept my own scoresheet, as did all of the other club members, but I had no idea that Essen was keeping score of our game; I didn't see him marking it, and he didn't do it for any of the other games. He gave this to me after our game."

"He say anything to you?"

"No; he didn't speak English, and I don't speak German."

"The writing at the top of the page: that's the name for this particular set of opening moves?"

"Yes," Garth said, and he knew he could replay those moves from memory, which he had done that morning in a room in the basement of the Russian Orthodox church on River Road.

"It's a Benoni," Leonid Denker had said after Garth had played the first five moves off the autographed scoresheet, moving the magnetic pieces on the large demonstration board placed on an easel at the front of the room.

Garth glanced over his shoulder at the burly, blond Pole who was sitting in a straight-backed chair, feet flat on the floor and thick

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arms powerful enough to break a man's back crossed over his barrel chest, in the middle of the group of seven players. Next to him sat his wife, Irina, also blond, thick-boned, fifteen years before a European Women's Champion. All of the players sat stiffly, unsmiling, focusing intently on the board. Only the bishop seemed relaxed as he stood at the back of the room leaning against the doorjamb, hands thrust through slits of his robe and into his pockets. Garth made another four moves, then stopped once more and looked around when he heard a faint but clearly audible intake of breath.

The second woman player, Gerta Stein, had put one of her thin hands to her mouth. Now she seemed to notice that it was trembling slightly, and she quickly took it away. "It's the Hromadka System."

"I'm impressed, Gerta," Garth said drily. "I'd never seen it before, and it took me forty-five minutes of combing through ECO before I could identify it. It's an obscure variation, not considered particularly sound."

"Perhaps Mr. Essen played that opening in my honor," Vladimir Hromadka said in a curiously mocking tone that was at once tinged with irony and anger.

Garth watched as the players in the chairs turned virtually as one to stare at the black-robed figure standing in the doorway. Garth could not see the faces of the players, nor the questions or emotions that might be reflected in the seven pairs of eyes, but the priest's face was impassive, unconcerned, as he stared back at them then simply shrugged enigmatically.

"I've studied all of Essen's games," Leonid Denker said tersely as he turned back toward Garth. "He never played that opening in his life."

"Then his record is intact," Garth replied evenly as he began to return the flat, magnetic metal pieces to their original squares. "I told you this was from the autographed scoresheet he gave me; I didn't say it was the game we played. Now let's take a look at the actual game."

Garth finished setting up the pieces on their original squares, then replaced the autographed scoresheet in his canvas carrying-case and took out another piece of paper. He taped the second scoresheet to the wall, next to the demonstration board, then slowly began to play the opening moves, first moving the white pieces, played by Uwe Essen, then his responses as black. After the sixth move he began to hear murmurs of surprise and disbelief, and he smiled thinly as he reflected on how quickly the players in the room

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grasped the significance of what was happening on the board. He recalled his own initial anxiety, which had quickly turned to a feeling of astonishment as the game had progressed, and he wondered how he would explain all this to Jeffrey Bond, who did not play chess, and who would say, "Now, let's see if I've got this straight. I understand that the letters and numbers on that paper represent every move of a particular chess game that was played. Right?"

"Or might have been played. Right."

"So he kept his own scoresheets of the games?"

"I didn't see him keeping score for any of the games, including mine, nor did he offer to give a signed scoresheet to anyone else. That in itself doesn't mean much, because he could probably have reconstructed any of the twenty-seven games from memory. But this is the one he gave me."

"But it's not the game that you played?"

"Right. It's not even close to the game that we played. For one thing, it's a totally different sequence of opening moves."

"So? Maybe it's the record of a game he played with one of the others. Playing twenty-seven people at the same time has to take some pretty heavy-duty mental work; he just forgot which game was which."

"No. First of all, a Grand Master would most likely remember every game that was played that night, and with whom. But he would certainly remember every detail of the one game he had lost. He knew exactly what he was doing when he gave me that scoresheet."

The police chief was silent for some time, staring at the paper on the desk in front of him. When he looked back up at Garth, his expressive eyes gleamed with interest, but also confusion. "So where are we? One of these Grand Master guys suddenly accepts an invitation to do one of these simultaneous exhibitions after ignoring you for two years; he does his thing, loses to you, gives you a totally inaccurate scoresheet, then goes out and kills himself."

"He went out and died."

"You're still saying all this business proves he was murdered?"

"It doesn't prove anything. I'm just trying to be precise about what happened."

"Why the hell would he give you a phony scoresheet?"

"A good question," Garth said, reaching into his case and taking out his folding board and chess pieces. He set up the board, took out his own scoresheet and placed it on the desk, then continued, "Jeff,

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I know you don't play chess, but I'm going to go through the moves of the actual game that Uwe Essen and I played and try to explain what's happening on the board as we go along, the significance of the moves."

"That's unsound," Leonid Denker said sharply as Garth removed one of the white pieces, a pawn, from the board and set it aside. "It's a *patzer* move. The pawn sacrifice does nothing for him, and it's anti-positional for white in the Queen's Indian. He has no compensation for the sac, and with correct play on your part he won't get it back."

Garth turned from the board, saw that pocket chess sets had appeared in the hands of all the players, who were holding them in their laps, frowning as they studied the position that had arisen. "He doesn't get it back," Garth said softly. "But it gets even better for black. Watch."

He made nine more moves, and on the board white's pieces began inexorably to move forward, conquering space, infiltrating the black position and surrounding the king. Then the black pieces began to counterattack in an effort to push back the white attackers.

"Wait a minute," Franz Heitler, a slight man in worn jeans and a torn denim shirt, said from the back as Garth removed a white bishop from the board. "That can't be right. You must have made a mistake on the scoresheet."

"There's no mistake on the scoresheet, Franz. This is the game as it was played."

"His play so far is a disaster anyway, but now he *must* retreat the bishop to d-two or c-one. It's a forced move! Without the bishop, his position is hopeless, even against a relatively weak player like you."

"He didn't retreat the bishop, Franz; he sacced it, just like you see here. And it's not the only forced move he ignores. At this point he begins saccing all his major pieces, one after another, even when he has no hope left of any kind of mating attack. The last piece he sacrificed was his queen, for a knight and two pawns. Here, I'll show you—"

"That's enough!" Leonid Denker shouted, sending his chess set crashing to the floor as he leaped to his feet. For a few moments the room was filled with the small rattling sounds of the tiny plastic chess pieces rolling in all directions on the linoleum tile. The big man's face was flushed brick red as he took four quick strides to the front of the room and with a sweep of one huge hand swept the demonstration board clean, sending the metal pieces crashing against the wall to his right. "Enough of this stupid game!"

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"Take it easy, Leonid," Vladimir Hromadka said softly from the doorway. "Garth Frederickson is not our enemy."

"Uwe Essen was a Stasi informer!"

"Ah," Garth said mildly, folding his arms across his chest. "So chess wasn't the only game Uwe Essen played."

Irina Denker, very pale and trembling, slowly rose from her chair. She clasped her hands tightly in front of her and said, "Uwe Essen informed on all of us, and on many other chess players, all during his career, from the time he was a young man. Even when there was nothing subversive to report, he would make things up. In return, he was allowed to continue his career in chess, to leave the country to play in major tournaments and the Candidates Matches when he qualified. We, and the others he informed on, were not, of course, permitted such liberties."

Garth nodded. "So he sacrificed your chess careers to further his own."

The woman slowly shook her head. "It's much more than that, Garth. It wasn't simply that we weren't allowed to play games against top players; we were also punished. And it wasn't only serious chess players he informed on and lied about. Father Hromadka spent two years in prison, where he was tortured."

"At least he didn't have to make up tales about me," the priest said with a thin smile. "I was definitely political."

Leonid Denker, still standing very close to Garth, was shaking his head like a wounded bull. Finally he appeared to find the words for what he was feeling, for he looked up at Garth and extended his arms in a gesture not unlike one of supplication, a plea for understanding. "Garth," the big man said, his voice cracking with emotion, "the man informed on his own *wife* and two *sons!* The oldest son was tortured; his right leg was broken, and if you meet him today, you'll see that he still walks with a limp."

"I was imprisoned because of things Essen told the Stasi about me," Gerta Stein said in a quavering voice that was just above a whisper. "I was raped repeatedly. Essen's wife also spent some time in prison, and I have to assume she was also raped, and possibly tortured in other ways—and all of this so that her husband, who was responsible for her being in prison, could continue to play chess and be a big man without being inconvenienced."

Garth slowly shook his head, sighed deeply. "Do his wife and sons know?"

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"Of course not!" Denker snapped. "Do you think they would be mourning the way they are if they knew what her husband and their father had done to them? Do you think we would have extended our friendship and welcomed him into our community if we'd known what he had done to *us?!*"

"When did you people find out about it?"

"Two weeks ago," Franz Heitler answered.

"How?"

"When East Germany collapsed, the Stasi tried to destroy or hide all their records. It was impossible. They only partially succeeded, because no other secret police organization ever had a passion for recordkeeping like the Stasi; there were entire buildings filled from floor to ceiling with nothing but records. Many of the records survived, like the file on Uwe Essen. Some friends in Germany discovered it, sent it to us."

"So you were blackmailing him, threatening to tell his wife and children? Immigration?"

"No," Vladimir Hromadka said in a clear, sharp voice. He pushed off the doorjamb, stood very straight. "Nobody in this room was trying to blackmail Uwe Essen."

"What were you planning to do with the information?"

"We hadn't decided."

"But Essen knew you had his file and knew the truth?"

"Yes."

"And he was worried about what you planned to do with the information."

"I certainly hope so," Leonid Denker said in a low voice that shimmered with rage.

In the silence that followed, Garth studied the seven chess players and the priest, who in turn studied him. Irina Denker slowly eased herself back down on her chair, and her husband retreated across the room to sit down beside her. Garth sensed that they were waiting for him to speak, to make the next move in this large game, and he said quietly, "It seems to me there are two ways of looking at, or describing, what Essen did last Monday night at the club. You could say he committed suicide over the board before he did the real thing off the bridge; or you could say he systematically murdered his own pieces—perhaps to send a message of some sort. We're left with the question of what game Essen was really playing on Monday night—with me, with you, and with his family. Would you care to help me try to analyze that one?"

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His question was followed by another prolonged silence, which was finally broken by the priest. "We're still here, Mr. Frederickson," Vladimir Hromadka said evenly. "I believe that is our answer."

"All right," Garth said with a nod. "Let's start with the endgame. A few hours before his life is to end he plays an outrageously bad game against a single opponent, and then he gives that player an autographed scoresheet that's totally inaccurate. First of all, why pick me?"

It was Franz Heitler who answered, "Before we received his file, we often talked with Essen about the many famous people who live in Cairn—movie stars, singers like your wife, artists, and writers. We told him about you and your smart little brother, about some of the very strange and difficult cases you've been involved in over the years. He knew you were a most excellent private investigator, and he could have found your picture in the newspaper files in the library."

The priest said, "He gave you the false scoresheet because he knew you would be intrigued, and perhaps more than a little troubled, by what was happening, and about to happen. He knew you would look up that opening in the *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings,* and discover that the name given to it is the same as my own. You would also have noted that none of the players from our community had been at the club that night, and he guessed that you would come here—as you have done, to do what you are doing. Perhaps it was his way of asking you for help."

Garth thought about it, shrugged. "That's going to an awful lot of trouble to ask for my help. If he was afraid that you people were going to harm him, why not just ask someone who spoke English and didn't know about him to approach me? For that matter, why wouldn't he simply have gone to the police?"

"Eastern Europeans learn at a very young age not to trust the police," Irina Denker said quietly. "If he wanted help against people who might harm him, it would be somebody like you he would have gone to—somebody he could trust not to betray him to his family."

"That interpretation could cause a lot of trouble for one or more of you in this room."

"You asked us to help you try to identify and analyze Essen's real game," Franz Heitler said in a sharp tone. "For an analysis to be of any value, every variation must be honestly evaluated. If that thought hadn't occurred to you, if you didn't think it possible that

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he was afraid we were going to kill him, you wouldn't be here."

Garth nodded. "All right, let's look at another variation. We're agreed that Uwe Essen definitely wanted something from me, but it's still unclear what he hoped to accomplish by doing what he did. So let's go back to the opening of that more complicated game he was playing that night. He prepared the scoresheet with the Benoni moves before he came to the club, intending to give it to me afterward. And then he made sure he got my attention by playing an atrocious game, ignoring forced moves and making one unsound sacrifice after another. But he didn't have to play like a *patzer* to make me sit up and take notice. He could have lost in a close game, or even won, and I would still have noticed that the scoresheet was all wrong, noted that all of you were missing, and found out that the opening variation had the same name as Father Hromadka. So why destroy all of his pieces over the board?"

Leonid Denker's lips curled back in a sneer, and when he spoke his voice was laced with contempt. "You have already said it. Maybe poor Uwe was afraid somebody was going to kill him, or that one or more people were waiting to ambush him that night after he left the club. If he was murdered, he wanted to make sure that at least somebody—you—knew who did it."

"There's another variation," Garth said evenly, meeting the big man's gaze, "and it has to be looked at. The false scoresheet was intended to focus my attention sharply on what actually did happen over the board. His game with me was a suicide note, the only one he left, and a confession—the only kind he could bring himself to make. In the game of his life he sacrificed everything, not only strangers, but also friends and family, to gain a position that finally turned out to be worth nothing. He couldn't live with the fear of being exposed as the truly rotten human being he was. He came to the club that night to be with chess players, and play chess, one last time before he went to resign the truly atrocious game of his life by jumping off the Tappan Zee Bridge."

"Which variation do you believe is the most sound, Mr. Frederickson?" the priest asked quietly.

"We have ourselves an extremely complex position," Garth replied, taking his scoresheet from the wall and replacing it in his canvas case, which he zipped shut. "It's unclear, difficult to analyze all the way to a definitive conclusion. I'm only a B player, remember?"

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"Not in this game you've been playing this morning," Irina Denker said in a low but steady voice. "Aren't you going to ask if one of us—or all of us—killed Uwe Essen?"

Garth looked into the faces of the people before him, each man and woman in turn, and finally replied, "It's not my responsibility to ask that question. It sounds to me like Uwe Essen had more than enough reason to want to kill himself. If one or more of you decided to help him along, then you have to go to the police, let the truth come out, and face the consequences, or live with the fear that one day you'll be found out—just like Essen. You'll be playing his endgame for the rest of your lives. As far as I'm concerned, I consider our relationship now to be the same as it was when I came here. I hope to see you at the club tomorrow night—you too, Father Hromadka. If you've been telling the truth—about the strength of your chess game—I might even be able to beat you."

"Garth?" Irina Denker said as he walked across the room.

Garth paused in the doorway and turned back. "Yes, Irina?"

"If you weren't expecting, or intending, to find out the truth about what really happened, why did you come here this morning?"

"Maybe I believe I have found out the truth about what happened, Irina. In any case, I considered my coming here a forced move. Have a good day."

"What do you expect me to do now?" Jeffrey Bond asked, frowning slightly as Garth began to remove the pieces from the board on the desk, putting them back in his case.

Garth put the folding board in the case, then looked up at his friend. "That's up to you, Jeff."

The police chief swiveled in his chair to stare out at the moonlit Hudson River below his window. He sat in silence for some time, then finally turned back. "I'll admit that what you've described, this game and all, is pretty damn strange, but—and don't take this personally—most chess players are pretty damned strange to begin with, and this Essen was apparently having a whole load of trouble. His wife and sons, and even his neighbors, say he was terribly depressed for two weeks before he took his dive. His wife wanted to hospitalize him, but he wouldn't go along with it. So what you have is a severely depressed guy, who's probably a real weirdo even on his best days, deciding to kill himself, but before he does he wants to play a little more chess. The fact that he blows one game and screws up a scoresheet when he knows that he's going to be checking out off the TZ in a little while doesn't seem to me to indicate that

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his death was anything but what the medical examiner determined it to be—a suicide. I'm not going to get his family any more upset by opening a murder investigation just because you won a chess game."

"All right."

"All right?"

"That's what I said. You want to keep the two scoresheets?"

"Why would I want the scoresheets?"

"Maybe there's a clue in them as to why he was depressed to the point where he killed himself—or a clue as to who might have killed him."

"Give me a break, Garth," the police chief said, pushing the pieces of paper across the desk to Garth, who hesitated, then folded them and put them in his pocket. "Is there something you're not telling me? It isn't like you to suggest that you could have knowledge of a crime, then leave me hanging without giving me some indication of what you think I should do about it."

"I haven't suggested anything, Jeff. Something I considered very unusual happened on the same night a man died; whether there's a connection between what I've described and the man's death is something for the police to determine. I felt I had to come here to tell you what happened, that's all. It's what chess players call a forced move."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

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"Jeffry Scott" is the pseudonym for a journalist for the London Evening Standard *who grew up in London, England, the son of parents who were both successful writers. The author began his own fiction-writing career at the age of fifteen and has since produced several hundred stories, to which this Christmas piece is a fine addition . . .*

NO GIFT FROM THE MAGI

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Something about snow, above all snow at Christmas, made Harry Abnell shed his years, which were many and mostly heavy. Christmas-card weather bolstered his comforting fantasy of exchanging present for past. Winter twilight made TV aerials and satellite dishes melt into the dimness, and snow's ability to blanket noise as well as terrain, even in London, restored Ironmonger Row to a quieter era.

Harry wasn't as old as the Row, of course. Those semidetached boxes facing each other two by two had been created by a Victorian magnate needing a place to store his work force, handy to the factory. But there were no older residents than Harry and his wife . . . who had been Nell for so long that it often took her husband a moment to recall that the names on her birth certificate were Eleanor Elizabeth.

That Christmas Eve, boots squeaking on the hammered white carpet of walkway, gloved fingertips grazing snow-crusted tops of front garden walls in case he slipped and had to grab for support—a broken hip at his age would be no joke—Harry Abnell was pondering on social changes.

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All but his own place, Number 30, had been tarted up. Double-glazed windows, many with those poncy blinds putting him in mind of beauty salons. And the front doors! He liked the brightness of a lick of fresh paint (Harry had caused a stir in 1949 by giving Number 30 perhaps the first vivid yellow, *butterfly* yellow trim in South London), but the New Lot's taste baffled him. Dim, sludgy colors with names such as aubergine or kumquat. Mr. Abnell felt that a clear line should be drawn between what you ate and what you slapped on the woodwork.

Stumping along, Harry grinned sourly. Invalided out of the army during World War II, he brought new bride Nell to Number 30 in time for the street party celebrating V-E Day, Victory in Europe, with another to mark the final peace. Trestle tables on the pavement, everybody cooking something to bring, balloons tied to lamp-posts, and every second house with the windows open and a wireless tuned to the agreed station and going full blast, for dancing . . . "See," Nell had whispered, daft article, "we're getting our wedding reception after all, luv." Money had been cruelly tight, their honeymoon a day trip to Brighton.

God knew how the New Lot would run a street party—not that they would, too standoffish. A giant quiche running the length of the Row, most likely, and their silly ficus trees and such, set out on the pavement by way of decoration. The fancy made Harry Abnell emit a singing-kettle noise, his chesty chuckle.

He remembered when Ironmonger Row was solid working class, thanks very much. The clocking-on hooter would whoop at the Pegasus Wire Rope Works, seconded by a hoarser, tardy one from Porritt's Pickles (*"We make the dullest dishes bite back!"*) and the majority of Row front doors opened as if on a communal handle. Men like Harry, who rolled their own cigarettes and felt themselves lucky to keep abreast of the rent, emerged to earn their bread and a scrape of margarine. None the worse for it neither, Mr. Abnell snorted, spectacles glinting in the dusk.

Harry Abnell had been taught to drive on Salisbury Plain roads in 1940, watched by timeless Stonehenge, and he drove trucks across the Western Desert and then Sicily and Italy and on to Germany, where a trembling twelve-year-old with a Panzerfaust rocket launcher blew the guts out of Sergeant Abnell's three-tonner, doing no good to Sergeant Abnell himself. Later, Harry had driven lorries for the Pegasus wireworks, and after the firm closed in the 1970s (Porritt's Pickles having taken their last bite a few years before),

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worked as garage storeman until his retirement. In all that time he had never owned so much as a motor scooter of his own.

Yes, he had grafted for a pittance by today's yardsticks. On the other hand, he and Nell had graduated from hand-filled zinc bath and outside lavatory, to all the modern (in 1961, anyway) conveniences. The landlord, well over a quarter-century ago, had offered to sell Number 30 for a thousand pounds down and the rest weekly, by installments not much bigger than the current rent. So now they owned their place. What depressed Harry was that Ironmonger Row was dominated by people who didn't actually work, in the sense of making things, but merely went to work.

Somebody had to do it: shuffle paper, buy and sell money, trade crops still unsown and minerals yet in the ground, without ever touching or even seeing them.

It was a shame, he mused, that so many of this soft-handed tribe had decided to live near Harry. You couldn't talk to them; or when you did, they were unable to understand. For instance, they saw football in terms of money, celebrities, and scandal rather than heart, skill, and tribal loyalty.

Maybe it was just the Generation Gap that pundits on telly had kept harping about back in . . . when was that? The 1960s, approximately. He hadn't heard the expression lately. Harry's kettle boiled again. He was wondering whether all the old fogeys like himself had tumbled into the Generation Gap, ending the need to discuss it.

Jokes aside, he missed bygone comradeship, shared experience. The rum part was that despite showy aspirations and fancier appetites, the New Lot were much the same characters—simply better paid, nourished, and educated. The old mixture of drunks, bullies, henpecked husbands, strivers, and idlers among the men. Their womenfolk were harder to read, if only because many of them dressed like tarts these days. (Trish-next-door, Harry and Nell's favorite, often shocked them by being clad like a streetwalker, albeit one with a classy beat outside those Rolls-Royce showrooms in Mayfair. But she was ever so nice, a real lady.)

Harry sighed again, glancing sidelong at Number 29, with the battered Porsche outside. Trish-next-door was the pick of the litter; the Abnells would have been proud to claim her as daughter. Trish's husband, Tony Lennox, was another matter. Mrs. Nell Abnell resented and disliked the fellow. Harry challenged her antipathy and ridiculed it—while secretly, Lennox worried him. Mr. Abnell knew something about Tony Lennox that Mrs. Abnell did not. More to the

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point, and the source of his sigh, he doubted whether Trish-next-door was aware of Lennox's secret.

"Christmas, old cock," Harry said out loud, giving Number 30's front gate a little kick at the bottom, automatically, to get it open. Peace on earth, goodwill towards men; he would call a truce on doubts for a few days. All the same, if that sulky bugger Lennox brought disgrace on Trish-next-door . . . Dentures grinding, Harry thrust his key into the lock.

Once indoors, glasses fogging, he hid his thoughts. "Cold enough for snow, duck." Mr. Abnell's epigrams and clothes alike were well worn, reappearing at appropriate times of year.

"Wipe your feet," Nell responded, though he had been doing that for seconds before she spoke. Harry by the door and Nell at the parlor table showed that twindom affecting veteran married couples. Both were birdlike, with small, bright eyes and prominent noses. Harry was fatter, a robin with its feathers fluffed against the weather, Nell a wren, alert and deft.

"We're socializing tomorrow," Mrs. Abnell announced. "Tea next door, four o'clock."

Groping for his slippers, Harry said, "Christmas afternoon? Gawd, I shall have to jump up and down for half an hour first, shake all that turkey and pudding down to make room."

"I'm only doing a capon, little 'un at that." Nell's sense of humour was blunted by literal-mindedness. "Anyway, it's just a slice of cake, cup o' tea kind of style. Dainty, I 'spect. Don't you go eating everything Trish offers, mind, just because it's free!"

"I'll mind my manners." Harry sat down, wriggling chilled toes. "Is it to be all of us, a neighbors' do?" *Can't wait,* was his mental comment, heavily ironic.

"Just us, I think. She popped round and asked me, you only just missed her. I got the impression Misery Guts doesn't know about it. If you want my opinion, Trish-next-door dreads spending the livelong blessed day on her ownsome with that one. Who wouldn't?"

"Tony always speaks well of you, luv." The jest being lost on her, Harry white-lied, "I don't b'lieve he's standoffish. More shy, nothing to say for hisself. Difficult for a bloke who's that way—with women, people try drawing them out, but blokes can go hang."

"Rubbish," Nell snorted. "Mr. Stuck-Up Lennox grudges wasting breath by even passing the time of day. Remember when I come flat out and asked what he does? 'Office work,' he says, and a look as much as to say, damn my impudence for showing an interest." She

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vibrated with remembered indignation. "And when I stood up to him, asked what sort of work might that be, he gives that sarcastic grin of his, and lets on, 'Work in an office'!"

Harry Abnell, sure that Tony Lennox was not snobbish but secretive—and with good reason—suggested innocently, "You could always ask Trish . . ."

"I have, but she gets embarrassed, changes the subject. He's told her to keep her mouth shut, any fool can tell that. Office work . . . Never gets home the same time two weeks running. Sometimes he's out all night. And all those different cars he drives, it's fishy. He's a wrong 'un, Harry, mark my words."

For Mr. Abnell, it was more than a suspicion. He'd been on the top deck of a bus one evening, and glimpsed Tony Lennox running along Foxwell Street, flickering from shadow to light and back again as he pelted beneath streetlamps, trees, streetlamps . . . Not just running but sprinting for dear life, before vaulting the park fence and vanishing, ready to risk a ten-foot drop into darkness sooner than . . .

Harry growled to himself, toes working in the slippers. No other passengers had noticed the incident, which was just as well. As the bus moved on, he had spied a copper, a uniformed constable with helmet tucked under one arm, running hard in pursuit. Obviously Lennox had got away, for next morning he was at home. But sooner or later his kind get caught.

"Chalk and cheese, Trish-next-door and that feller," he muttered.

"She married below her," Nell confirmed, misunderstanding her husband's drift. "He's one of us, drops his aitches and that. Got a corner-boy look about him. What about the time he got his face all banged up, eh? Fell down, he reckoned. Fell against some other hooligan's fist, more like. Or too drunk to stand, nasty beast. But Trish, she's quality—way she talks, she comes from a posh home, posh school."

"She's a cracker . . . Christmas cracker." The whistling kettle spurted briefly. "Stand on me, gel, one look at Trish-next-door and I wish I was—oh, sixty agen."

This was humour Nell could recognise. She slapped his arm and turned bracingly ribald as only Cockney matrons can be. "Gerroff! She'd kill you, luv, those long legs would wrap round you twice and then it would be 'Hello, St. Peter, I've been a naughty boy.' "

"Have to make do with you then, blossom," Harry conceded. "Talking of which, they was sweeping up in the Market, and I rescued

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this stuff." From behind his back he produced a decidedly underprivileged sprig of mistletoe, boasting a single berry.

"I have heard tell," Mr. Abnell chortled, leering for all he was worth, "this little rascal has magic properties, if I should happen to bump into a pretty, easygoing woman like your good self . . ."

Tony Lennox watched his wife unpacking plastic bags bearing the logo of a West End store. "You're not thinking of cooking tomorrow, are you? Let's go out, same as we always do. I booked months ago."

Trish swung round from the fridge. Dazzler, Lennox thought, as he generally did. He always remembered her as gorgeous, but no matter how many times he walked into a room and set eyes on her, the reality was better. She was absurdly beautiful and beautifully absurd—mini-dress, fishnet tights, and black suede thigh-boots giving her the seasonal air of a pantomime Principal Boy.

Abstractedly, Lennox wished that he had showered and changed into something better than ratty jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt from his distant youth. Instead he had caught up on couch-potato time. Watching football he had recorded months ago, and pretending (he smiled bitterly) to be a regular citizen. One of the sheep instead of a hunter.

Christmas Eve, Tony Lennox reminded himself, so stop the self-pity, nobody put a gun to your head and told you to go into crime as a career.

"You've been out in that gear without getting arrested?" he teased.

"Office party for us and a few show-biz reporters. I looked quite demure. Bernadette, that little punkette on the switchboard, turned up in see-through top and bottom, just a G-string underneath for decency. Though that was hardly the word." She gave him a wicked smile. "You had to be there. But I'll do my best to give you the gist of it, later."

Different world, he thought. Trish was a partner in a PR company handling plays and revues. For an instant he was shaken by the contrast with his life. To his dismay, he put Trish, that inquisitive old baggage next door and her lumpen husband, and the rest of Ironmonger Row into the same scorned category—sheep. Blundering along with their eyes open, but blind to the way things were, the things needful for survival.

Contrite, for reasons he had no intention of disclosing, Lennox hugged his wife. Wriggling free, she said, "I must get this lot put

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away. And I *am* cooking a real Christmas dinner, like Mum made for you."

"Hope not," he said drily. Tony Lennox's childhood had been bleak. Striving for diplomacy, he ventured, "Isn't it a bit, um, elaborate, turkey and stuffing and that?" Trish had grown up in a house where her mother, asked about the next meal, would consult Cook. Trish could burn water, never mind toast. She claimed, and he almost believed it, that the first night away from home she had to ask the girl in the next bed-sit how tea bags worked.

Flourishing an enormous pack before sliding it into the freezer, Trish assured him, "This is foolproof. Me-proof, yet. Four-course Yuletide banquet, all you do is thaw it and nuke it."

"Can't wait," Lennox said under his breath, unwittingly echoing Harry Abnell, just the other side of the shared wall of Numbers 29 and 30.

If Trish caught the words, she ignored them. Shopping forgotten, she looked up at Lennox. "I want it to be a proper Christmas, darling. I mean, we've been here for two years, nearly, and—"

"I am not having the bloody neighbours in, nor trooping round to the bloody neighbours." Lennox lowered his voice. "Sorry, but you know how it is. Anyway, they're just a pack of wimps and ponces and put-on artists."

"Just what *I* thought," Trish nodded, suspiciously meek. "What do we need with ponces and put-on artists." Lennox's smile became unforced. When Trish tried speaking his language it sounded affected as Restoration drama dialogue, ludicrously inappropriate. So it should. She'd never put the boot in, wasted long nights swapping lie for lie, threat for threat with human animals; seen a face turned to red ruin between one breath and the next . . .

She ran a fingernail round the T-shirt picture on his chest. "But Harry and Nell aren't like that, they're the oldest inhabitants. So I knew you wouldn't mind us having them to tea tomorrow . . ." Standing that close, she could avoid his eyes.

"Great. Two years, you said. Two years of talking to myself." Lennox distanced himself, face stormy. "You can tell everyone all about yourself and what you do, that's fine. Me, I can't afford it. Ma Abnell of all people, nosiest old crow in the street! He's all right, but . . . bloody hell fire, I've run across skilled interrogators in my time, and Mrs. A. missed her slot in life. Her wozzit, vocation. She ain't subtle, but my word, she's flaming persistent."

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He laughed angrily. "Thanks, Trish. You don't know people like him and her next door. Get a toe in, and they don't rest until they ferret out what underpants I wear, boxer or Y-fronts."

Her voice trembled fractionally. "They're old people, darling. They won't mind what you are. It's not as if you would . . . you know, do anything to them. They won't take any notice."

"Wrong. I've made that mistake before. Been there, and it stinks. They treat you differently, always on edge. And they put the word around. 'That nice Mrs. Lennox at 29, talks so posh . . . you'll never guess about her hubby,' " he mimicked.

Trish, pale but determined, said, "Tony, don't take this the wrong way, you're the kindest man . . . when you let yourself be. I'm not saying you are selfish, I know you love me, but there are other people in life besides us. No, you've laid the law down, it's my turn, hear me out."

"I'm listening."

"I want to give Nell and Harry something. They don't get presents at Christmas, except from each other. The daughter and her husband were killed in a road accident and they are estranged from their grandson. Besides, Nell let slip what they get as state pension. It's a . . . *pittance.*"

"Right, they have to last a week on what you spring for a pair of shoes or lunch with the girls. They get by." His gaze sharpened. "Oi, don't go trying to give 'em money. She may be a pain and he's an old bore, but they got their feelings, their dignity. You wouldn't know, but for the likes of them two, charity is a nastier word than . . . oh, cancer, murder, the worst stuff you can imagine."

Trish badly wanted to point out that she had supported herself and been poor between leaving university and moving in with him. She was frivolous, arguably shallow, but not a fool—in fact, smart enough to earn more than half their combined incomes, even if she frittered away at least forty percent of her side. And come to that, the reason for cutting loose from her family was because they had been appalled by Tony Lennox: his upbringing, manner, background, everything about him.

"I know better than to insult the Abnells, Tony. But if they come to tea, I can give them the hamper. Only a little one, from Harrods." She set her hands in an angler's measurement, moving them apart gradually as honesty prevailed. "Not the gigundeous, top-of-line one, anyway," she said defiantly.

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"Same difference, you'll still embarrass them being Lady Bountiful when they won't have a present for you."

"Bet your life Nell will bring something, even if it's only a pot of jam. They know how to do things right and proper, Nell keeps saying so. Don't you see, darling? Having them here is the only way we can give them a little treat without causing offense—it will be just a gift for a gift. I adore Christmas!"

"Have it your way. But if Ma Abnell tries third-degreeing me again, I'm off to the pub."

At precisely six minutes past four, Nell Abnell decreed, "Too late is just as bad manners as being too early. Off we go, my lad." Mr. and Mrs. Abnell smelled of mothballs, faces and hands scoured pink, hair tidy, his shoes polished, her granny's necklace of jet beads glittering.

"Merry Christmas," Trish-next-door cried. She was wearing a long dress for once, velvet in a shade between mulberry and oxblood, and a choker Nell assumed—wrongly—to be paste diamonds.

Nell gasped, "You look a princess, darlin'."

"A queen," Harry upped the ante. "Tuppence to talk to you, sixpence if you bow."

She kissed Nell on both cheeks, smacked another on Harry's mouth, before removing lipstick traces with a hankie. "Tony, take their coats, darling."

Lennox did as he was bid, wishing husband and wife the compliments of the season without undue enthusiasm. "Beautiful," Nell enthused, hardly knowing where to look next in the living room. There was a white Christmas tree with just a few baubles, dusky pink or chocolate coloured, there was holly, and the fattest Christmas crackers she had ever seen, forming a stockade at the base of the tree. On the window sill, a gilt carousel bearing angelic trumpeters in profile, spinning in the heat from a candle. Nell Abnell filed away every nuance of decor, temporary and permanent, from carpet to cornice.

"Cozy," Harry Abnell agreed. "You've done wonders with this place, Tony, made a little palace."

"Not down to me, the managing director fixed all that." Lennox was borderline ungracious. "Don't care whether wallpaper is flowered, striped, or sky-blue-pink with dots. Not much of a homebody, me." Behind his back, Nell nodded grimly. Lennox, manifestly forcing geniality, asked, "Drop of the hard stuff, anyone? Port and

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lemon, Mrs. A.? Harry, I got a fair old single malt, if you like scotch."

"Too early for us." Nell, hearing sharpness in her reply, blushed and coughed. "Ooh, Harry! Silly old thing, you left You Know What at home."

Soon he returned, presenting Trish with a brace of tissue-wrapped bottles. "Only a token, luv. Nothing special." Nell chimed in with, "We never come empty-handed."

Trish, stripping a bottle with childlike excitement, beamed at them. "Gosh, it's terrific wine. Chablis, I read somewhere that this chateau and year is unobtainable. Thank you so much."

"Don't build your hopes up, dear. Harry bought three bottles of that at the Oxfam shop, donkey's years ago. We had one for our fortieth anniversary, and it was very acid, we wondered whether it was off. Quite tasty once you stir some sugar in, though."

Lips trembling upwards at the corners, Trish burst into a fit of coughing so severe that she had to turn aside. Avoiding her husband's sardonic eyes, she mumbled apologies and fled to the kitchen.

Harry heaved out of his chair to help her, when she reappeared bearing the hamper. "Exchange is no robbery—we had to wait till you came here, it wouldn't go through your letterbox." She giggled.

Nell gasped, "You shouldn't of!" And then, bewildered, "What is it?"

"Picnic basket," Harry said. "Thanks very much, Trish, Tony."

"Open it, Dad," Mrs. Abnell squeaked. And when the lid creaked up— "Ooh, Harry, real wickerwork, *smell* it, *listen* to it." She knelt on the carpet and began removing the contents. "Jam, in tiny little jars. Cav-eye-are! Never tried that, I 'spect it's like fishpaste only better. Candied fruit. Gentleman's Relish—that lets you out, Harry." She broke off to catch Trish's hand. "You shouldn't of, throwing your money away for us. Enough here for a regiment."

Taken aback by the impact of something she'd picked out and paid for in minutes, to be forgotten for days in the back of her car, Trish was shamefaced. "Oh, that's okay," she said lamely.

Nell arranged treasures on the coffee table—"More jam, cherries in a jar, Turkish delight"—like a little girl playing shops. Trish hitched up her skirt and knelt alongside, rummaging through the packing. Tony Lennox's cold eyes softened at the sight.

"Wonderful creatures, women," Harry remarked, guessing his thoughts. "Live to be a hundred and you'll never know their full starting-price. Kids one minute, harpies the next, ministering angels the next, and Lord knows what between times. Permutate

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any three sides from a million, and that's your average woman on an average day."

Lennox showed mingled amusement and respect. "You've thought a lot about this, Dad, am I right?"

"Only every day of my married life. And I'm not your father. Nell calls me Dad because we had a kiddie, before you was born nor thought of. I answer to Mr. Abnell or Harry."

"Sorry," Lennox said stiffly.

"No bones broken, it was ignorance, not malice," was the bland acknowledgement. Harry jerked his chin at Trish, heads together with his wife, glossy, rain-straight auburn hair beside Nell's grey, regimented curls. "You've got a good 'un there. Good looker, heart the size of a bucket, and doesn't love herself the best. London's jam-packed with them, you could find half a dozen like her tomorrow—I don't think. Eh?"

"That's why I married her." Lennox was wary, sensing the old buffer leading up to something.

"Keeping them, that's the trick. Shame if you did something daft, got parted from her. As it might be for years."

Matching Harry's undertone and adding ice for good measure, Tony Lennox stated: "I don't know what you're on about. And if you've got a head on your shoulders, you won't go talking rubbish behind my back, neither."

Harry was unruffled. "Worst of you clever fellows is, you're never sharp enough to twig how stupid you are." He strolled over to the women and helped them repack the hamper.

Then came tea, with a spectacular Christmas cake. "Trish baked and iced it herself," said Lennox, poker-faced. "Even hand-painted that little label on the frill—you'd swear it came from Harrods." Nell was seduced into a crowing laugh, and the suspicion that he might have a bit of fun and humanity.

As if the joke exhausted his bonhomie, Lennox subsided into silence and, after Trish and Nell had cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher, retreated into his reclining chair and apparent dozing. Nell said, "We'd better be going then," openly hurt, but Trish would not hear of it.

"Tony's been working very hard lately, he doesn't mean to be rude. Come and see upstairs, we'll leave the men to it. Harry, if there's anything you'd like to watch on TV . . ."

"Fine as I am, ta." The Lennox home was warm—maybe this double-glazing lark had more to it than keeping up with fash-

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ion—and Harry, basking, had doffed his jacket and put his feet up on a stool. "Carry on, ladies, I shall have a little think with my eyes closed." Pretty sure that Lennox was faking, Harry Abnell let him continue the act. Funny old way to spend Christmas night, well, early evening, but not so dusty. How had they put it back in the war? A cushy billet, that was it. He was in a cushy billet, not to mention an overstuffed chair, lulled by the faint sound of the women chatting upstairs, gentle as pigeons cooing. Sicily, the break in the campaign, he'd had the fifteen-hundredweight truck, lovely little runner. They had rested in the courtyard of a large farm or small castle, olive-skinned girls doing laundry in the fountain's broad basin, and pigeons cooing, unless they had been doves . . . White birds wheeling, the play of water, and girl's limbs and—

"Harry, you was snoring *and* dribbling." A scandalised Nell shook him, thrusting a fresh cup of tea under his nose.

"Shows that he's relaxed," Trish soothed her. "We've been making your wife over, Harry." Whatever that meant; Nell did seem a touch feverish.

"Blusher," Nell simpered. "Like it, luv?"

Tony Lennox stirred, sitting up and smacking his lips. "Dropped off, sorry." His regret sounded minimal. He rose and stretched. "Ready for that drink, Harry?" The tone nearly demanded polite refusal.

Before his wife could intervene, Harry said, "Just a drop, then." Cussedness tilted him into delaying departure. Damn Lennox, Nell was enjoying herself and Trish seemed glad of company. Yet Harry had vowed to mind his manners, so . . . "For the road—we've outstayed our welcome."

"Nonsense," Trish retorted, though her husband was conspicuously silent. "No need to rush off."

Drink delivered, another in his own hand, Lennox sat in glum silence. Nell, sensing strain and making conversation, prattled about the hamper. "Such a surprise, too. I had to buy Harry's prezzie to me, bed jacket, quite nice. Men are hopeless at clothes. And he knew he'd get slippers. Socks or a pullover one year, slippers the next. Nice, but it's not the same when you know in advance . . ."

Harry rapped his glass down. "Crikey, we *have* got another present, gel. Clean forgot about it. The mystery parcel."

Tony Lennox was catnapping once more, but Trish showed polite interest. "Parcel?"

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"He's right." Nell clapped her hands, eyes sparkling. "It came the end of November and we hadn't sent away for nothing, so it must be for Christmas. I put it under the stairs. Slipped our minds this morning. Another surprise for when we get home!"

"Bit of a facer, that parcel," said Harry, grateful for something to talk about. "What you might call a conundrum. Lucky it ever got delivered, they had the address wrong. Mr. H. Absell, 30 Iremonger Row, Cadshall—and that's not even the next borough, Cadshall is miles off."

"Must be one of our friends what moved away. We lost touch with some, and others—the Christmas cards stop coming, so you know they've passed on. Only six cards this year." Nell patted Trish's hand. "Yours was the best."

"Beats me who it could be from," said Harry. "Nell thinks it must be one of my mates from before I retired."

"Oily paw marks all over the brown paper," his wife explained. "Looks to me like it was packed in a garage or a workshop." She was unaware of Tony Lennox's closed eyelids flickering as he listened intently. "It could be Jim Nowell, Harry, that mechanic at Pegasus. You was very thick with him, good mates, the darts team and snooker and that."

Harry made a doubting face. "Could be. Only the postmark is Manchester, and last I heard, Jim had moved to Devon with his youngest girl, the widowed one. Well, we'll know in a minute." He drained his tumbler and reached for his discarded jacket.

Covertly amused, Trish demanded, "Why on earth didn't you open it straightaway, if it's such a puzzle?"

Nell blinked at her. "You can't go opening Christmas presents ahead of the day. Spoils the fun, luv. And the people what sends them trusts you to play fair . . ."

"Yes, but it might not be a present, it could be—oh, just an ordinary parcel with nothing more than a free sample or something."

"Must be a Christmas thing, stands to reason." Nell was gently stubborn. "I told you, we haven't ordered nothing, and it's too heavy for a sample."

Lennox startled them all by speaking. He was out of his chair. "And like you said, you don't get much in the way of Christmas gifts, right? So you wanted to make this one last . . . spin things out by guessing who it's from."

Harry was offended; no, bloody angry. To be sneered at by a villain, sniggering over him and Nell being childish! "Maybe. That's our business," he snapped.

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"Harry!" Nell, mortified, shook his arm. "Say you're sorry, biting his head off like that."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Can't you see he's laughing up his sleeve? We may not have much, but at least it's come by honest, nothing in my house that hasn't been bought fair and square." He turned a shoulder to Lennox and addressed Trish. "Thank you for asking us round, dear, but we had better go home. Nell, get your hat and coat, we're off."

"I don't think so." Tony Lennox barred the way. Either the paper chains strung corner to corner made the ceiling seem low, or he was a taller, more commanding figure than Harry had realised. "You'd better stay here a while. I'll trouble you for your door key, Harry. Parcel's under the stairs, you say?"

Mr. Abnell, shaky but pugnacious, squared to him. "What's your game? You can't go walking into my house and ransack it. I've got witnesses, your own wife heard you, and mine. Let me past this minute or I'll have the police on you, neighbour or no."

"Gimme patience! I am the police, okay?" And less ferociously, "If you want, I'll go upstairs and get my warrant card."

Trish Lennox affirmed, "He isn't kidding, honestly. Detective Inspector, no less. But heaven knows what's got into him now."

"They say providence protects drunkards and fools." Superintendent Ryde of the Antiterrorist Squad, laid-back style flawed by savagely bitten nails, laughed shortly. "If those pensioner pals of yours had done as they were supposed to and opened the thing at once, you'd be living next door to a heap of rubble, with them underneath it."

Inspector Lennox nodded soberly. "I tell you, sir, it made my hair stand on end, half-listening to them gassing away—and all of a sudden catching on. They were going through the checklist for suspicious packages: faulty address, grease marks on the wrapping, and so forth. A day or two later Mrs. Abnell even told me she had noticed a funny smell under the stairs, but she never connected it with the parcel stored there. That added up to three of the telltale signs for a parcel bomb."

"Make that four," Ryde corrected. "The paper got torn when the old chap shoved the parcel past a nail on the shelf. Electric wiring was visible through the rip. My chaps who defused it simply cannot credit that sensible people didn't run a mile at the very sight of that package." He shrugged resignedly. "Forget stupidity, let's call it innocence."

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Lennox hesitated; he didn't know the superintendent too well. "None of my business, sir . . . but what made the Abnells a target? Unless the address was totally wrong and it got delivered in error; but they were positive the old boy's name was on it."

"It was—they were targets right enough. There's a grandson, living abroad now, under a new identity. He was in the army, did a tour of duty across the water, and went back posing as a deserter with arms to sell, in eighty-three. They caught on that he was a plant, a spook. He got out of Belfast just ahead of an assassination team. Somebody wanted retaliation and with the agent beyond reach, they settled for anybody connected with him. Hence the bomb for Mr. and Mrs. Abnell. Postage stamps and postmark were fakes: it must have been delivered by hand. If the Post Office had dealt with that thing, it would have been picked up by scanning equipment at the sorting office."

Inspector Lennox cursed disgustedly. "That's sick! Harry and Nell haven't set eyes on their grandson since before he joined the army. He wanted nothing to do with them."

Superintendent Ryde was pitying. "Don't try making sense of it, we're talking terrorism and revenge. The grandson couldn't be executed so they went for his nearest kin."

"But the old folk were nothing to this man, he probably doesn't care what happens to them. And if he's living abroad, he might never find out, anyway."

"Big deal." Ryde, nibbling a cuticle, sounded muffled. "If the terrorists had known that, they might still have delivered the bomb. They shoot workmen dead in those parts for replacing a police station's roof tiles or fixing its plumbing. Mr. and Mrs. Abnell are guilty as hell, by those lights. Just for being related to a spy."

Tony Lennox departed in chastened mood. He had been so sure of knowing the real world: the predators and the sheep. Disturbingly, he had been made to understand that he was an innocent of sorts, too.

Trish Lennox murmured, "Twelfth Night tomorrow, the decorations must come down. I'm always a bit blue when Christmas is over for another year." She turned to her husband, admitting her true concern. "Are they safe now, Nell and Harry?"

Lennox had given her a strictly edited version of events behind the Abnells' parcel. Now he said, "I believe so. Expert opinion is that whoever sent it is unlikely to try again. Unless the target is

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mega-important, a botched try is the end of it. Too risky to try again—the security people are wise to the game and could have set traps. Harry and Nell were just a couple more names on a very long list . . . plenty more targets to replace them."

"What a world," Trish groaned, hugging herself.

"It's not so bad," Lennox consoled her, awkwardly. "Those two will be drawing their pensions for a good few years yet, thanks to you."

"Don't be patronizing, Tony."

Lennox was hurt. "Leave off! If you hadn't invited them here, I wouldn't have heard that stuff about the parcel and stopped them from opening it. It's down to you, sweetheart. I'm an unsociable sod, paranoid into the bargain. You wouldn't let me get away with that, though I gave you a hard time—and you saved their lives."

Cheering up, Trish said, "Hooray for Christmas, then. Thank goodness they're old-fashioned enough not to open presents until the twenty-fifth. Score one for Santa Claus." And then she giggled.

"What?" he demanded.

"All that stuff about people treating you differently once they know you're a policeman. The Abnells don't mind coppers, it's villains they can't abide. That's why Harry was so prickly with you. He felt certain you were a crook, and he didn't like it a bit."

"Silly old fool. He saw me chasing a bag-snatcher into the park and got the wrong idea. P.C. Plod was after me, all right. Not pursuing, just trying to keep up, and making a rotten job of it."

Slipping an arm round his waist, Trish said, "It's funnier than Harry getting the wrong idea. The real joke is that he and Nell were just about the only people in this street who didn't know you were a copper. Your cover was blown weeks ago, and we never knew it."

"I don't believe it," said Lennox. "Okay, I don't go chinwagging with the neighbours, but I see a bit of them. Somebody would have made some smart-ass crack, looked guilty, crossed to the other side of the road, or whatever. How could they know? My patch is nowhere near here—chasing that thief, when Harry clocked me, was an exception. I was off duty, minding my own business, when I got involved."

"They knew because somebody told them," she said patiently. "Christmas night, when there was all the rumpus with the Bomb Squad turning up and so forth . . . You were busy, so I went outside, giving Nell and Harry time on their own in here. Remember how

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upset they were, confused? They needed privacy so Nell could have a darned good weep, and Harry comfort her.

"Lots of the neighbours were out there, everyone mingling, the old Blitz spirit, barriers down. After a minute I caught on—most of them know you're in the police and took it for granted you were on top of things. They were very glad to have their own personal police officer, as a matter of fact. But you've been fretting over nothing—basically, they don't care what you do, it isn't important."

"I'd love to know how they found out . . ."

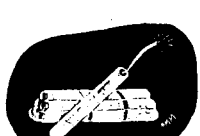
"Somebody grassed on you. Lorette, that ghastly woman in the house halfway along, our side? Wears an ankle chain, has to be fifty but dresses sixteen. She used to be married to a copper. Lorette remembered you and her ex playing on the police cricket team when you were at Mitcham, before the CID.

"So there you are. She mentioned the coincidence to several of her friends—'Small world, I remember him when'—she's not an original thinker, poor dear. They told their friends, and so it goes." Trish giggled again. "Lorette says she would have spoken to you, but 'He's terribly *forbidding,* your hubby, quite scares me.' Big smile next time you see her, please."

"Fat chance. I might clip her ear, the gossipy bag." Tony Lennox glared at his wife. "Maybe they don't care—for the moment. But you'll laugh the other side of your face when they start pestering at all hours, our friendly, admiring neighbours, reporting lost dogs, wanting domestic tiffs adjudicated, signatures witnessed. Last thing at night or just when we're running late for work, wait and see."

"Scandalous," she agreed gravely. "Look, now that your shameful secret is out, may we entertain just a teeny bit? At least I can have Nell and Harry in for a meal, now and then. I'm sure they skimp on food to pay their heating bills."

"Out of the question," said Lennox. She was so stricken that he yelped, "I'm kidding. Sort of. Invite who you like—but I'd better take care of the cooking."



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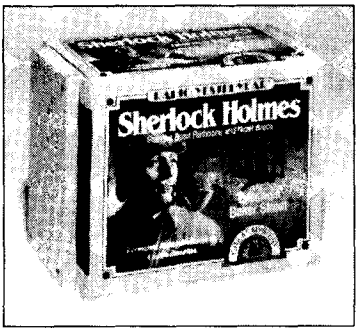

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a *NEW* short story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Those four hectic weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas can make or break the department stores. To ensure that their store has the best promotion, the marketing whizzes in Mr. Hoch's new story are prepared to go all the way to Tokyo . . .

A TRAFFIC IN WEBS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was during her college days that Susan Holt first encountered Walter Pater's essay on Leonardo da Vinci with its celebrated evocation of the Mona Lisa. One phrase read: *She . . . has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants.* That last part especially stuck in her mind. She did not know exactly what it meant but she knew, like Mona Lisa, that it was something she wanted to do—to traffic for strange webs with Eastern merchants.

Careers often move in strange directions after graduation, and for Susan her course in art appreciation led somehow to a job in retailing, in the promotions section of Manhattan's most famous department store. She'd been there seven years, handling a good bit of the Christmas promotions and the displays that went with them, when Saul Marx, the head of the department, entered the office on the first working day after Christmas.

"Time to get started on next year's planning," he said, as he always did right after Christmas. "We've got to top this year."

"That'll take some doing," Mike Brentnor said from his desk opposite Susan's. "Got any ideas?"

Saul Marx always had ideas. That was why he was head of the department. "I've been reading about something really spectacular

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in Tokyo this Christmas. One of their big stores has a display of spider webs that—"

This was too much even for Brentnor. "Spider webs! I can find some up at our country place if you really want them."

"I'm serious," Marx assured him. "In fact, I want you to fly over there while the display is still in place. These aren't your ordinary spider webs. They're said to be bizarrely beautiful, almost like works of art. Once you see them I want you to phone me. If they're as wonderful as I've heard, we'll make the artist an offer to show them here next Christmas."

"The artist?" Mike Brentnor scoffed. "You mean the spider who wove them? What would I offer him—ten thousand flies?"

"There's a Japanese professor who creates them by feeding various drugs to the spiders—LSD, pot, that sort of thing."

"My God! We'd have the SPCA on our necks!"

Strange webs, Susan thought, and suddenly remembered that phrase from her college reading of Walter Pater: . . . *trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants.* "I'll go," she said almost without thinking. "Let me go to Tokyo."

Saul Marx turned to stare at her, as if only then remembering she was in the room. "You, Susan? Do you think you could handle something like this?"

"I arranged last year's spring show of exotic flowers, and I handled negotiations for the Best of Britain promotion two years ago," she reminded him. "You sent me to London for that."

He thought about it, but not for long. It was obvious Mike Brentnor wasn't enthused with the idea, and the only other person to send was on vacation till after New Year's. "I want someone to see these webs on display in the Tokyo store," Saul said. "They come down after New Year's, so it has to be this week. Are you up to that, Susan?"

She glanced at Brentnor, who was sinking into his pouting mode. "You bet I am!"

"Very well. See me in my office at two and we'll go over the details."

That evening she broke the news to Russell, an off-and-on live-in boyfriend who was rehearsing for a play down in SoHo. Arriving at the loft where the actors were just finishing their run-through, she got him aside. "Bad news, Russell. I can't make Nell's New Year's party. I have to fly to Tokyo for the store."

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"What? Tokyo?" His face showed disappointment and the beginning of anger. "I was counting on it, Susan. What happened?"

"Brentnor doesn't want to do it and I'm next in line. I have to catch a display while it's up and negotiate to bring it to New York for next Christmas."

"Tokyo, for God's sake! There's no chance you can get back in time?"

"Today's the twenty-seventh already. I'm flying over Wednesday but it'll be late Thursday their time when I get in. That gives me Friday to see the display and that's New Year's Eve. Even if everything went perfectly, it would be Saturday night or Sunday before I could get back. You can tell Nell how sorry I am."

"I don't know that I want to go alone."

"Why not? You know everyone."

"It's not the same going alone on New Year's Eve."

My God, she thought, he's pouting just like Mike Brentnor at the store. "I'm sorry," she said firmly. "It can't be helped. It's my job." He turned to walk away and she added, "What about tonight?"

He gestured toward the others. "I'm rehearsing. That's my job."

She nodded. "You can use the apartment while I'm gone if you wish. You still have the key, don't you?"

"It's around somewhere."

She turned away, trying to mask her annoyance. "I'll be back next week. You can call me."

"Sure."

Susan caught the Wednesday morning flight to Tokyo, settling in with her laptop computer for the long journey ahead. The trip took about fourteen hours, and Tokyo was fourteen hours ahead of New York time. Her eleven A.M. flight from New York would land her at Tokyo's Haneda Airport at three o'clock Thursday afternoon. It was a day lost to her, and there was little consolation in the fact that part of it would be regained on the return flight.

The airport was on the southern fringes of the city and the newer Narita Airport was even farther away. Something she noticed in the terminal after landing was that she was taller than most of the Japanese men. Back in New York she rarely thought about her height. Suddenly one of these Japanese men was right in front of her, bowing from the waist. "Miss Susan Holt?" he asked in perfect English.

"I—Yes, that's me."

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"I am Takeo Keio, manager of Fuji Star. I have come to meet you and guide you around our city."

"How nice!" She shook his hand. "This is my first visit to Tokyo. I was worried about finding my way around."

"We will claim your luggage and pass through customs. Then I will deliver you to your hotel."

"Thank you, Mr. Keio."

His limousine was long and white, like one that might be rented for a wedding back home. She settled into the plush leather seat, anxious for her first glimpse of the sprawling city. "Tokyo extends over nine hundred and thirty square miles," Mr. Keio explained as they headed away from the airport on the expressway into the central city. "Yet everything is crowded. It is a very confusing city to a visitor."

"New York is crowded too," she assured him.

"Ah, but not like Tokyo. I have been to New York many times. Your stores are always a great inspiration to us."

"I understand Mr. Marx spoke to you on the phone about our interest in the webs display."

"Yes, yes! Professor Hiraoka has performed a miracle. Wait until you see his webs!"

"I'm anxious to get a look at them."

"Fuji Star is open late tonight if you care to—"

Susan glanced at her watch. It was after four already and she wanted nothing so much as a warm shower and a bed. "I'd better wait till morning," she pleaded. "The long flight really exhausted me."

"Very well." He spent the rest of the drive pointing out the sights to her, and when she remarked on a large structure that looked like the Eiffel Tower he announced proudly, "It is fifty-nine feet higher than the Eiffel. Our Tokyo Tower is for radio and television transmission. We have four major commercial rivals here—Fuji TV, which has no connection with our store, Nippon TV, Tokyo Broadcasting System, and TV Asahi. You may view them all on the set in your room. And that large building just ahead is your hotel. It is across the square, only a five-minute walk from Fuji Star."

"Thank you so much for the tour, Mr. Keio."

"I will look for you in the morning, then? We will be closing early for the New Year's holiday, so I suggest you arrive before noon."

"I'll be in your office by ten," she promised.

* * *

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Susan knew virtually no Japanese, so she spent little time with the network stations on her TV. She ordered dinner in her room and relaxed with a channel showing English-language news. Presently she stretched out on the bed to get more comfortable and fell asleep almost at once. When she awoke it was dark outside. She turned off the television and noted that the time was just after midnight. Then she took the shower she'd promised herself and went back to bed, sleeping restlessly until around five in the morning.

Looking out at the wakening city, Susan was surprised at the amount of early-morning activity. By the time she went down to breakfast at seven, the streets resembled a New York rush hour. The hotel restaurant served a passable Western breakfast. Back in her room she wrapped a small gift she'd brought for Keio, remembering that unwrapped gifts were considered rude in Japan. When she left the hotel just after nine, she noticed a Japanese youth follow her out.

As she waited for the traffic light to change, she suddenly had the impression of being shoved in the small of her back, but it happened so quickly she couldn't call it a deliberate act. Then she was falling, her leather briefcase flying from her grasp, just as a speeding taxi bore down on her. She landed on her hands and knees, feeling the pain, bracing for the instant impact of the taxi. Then a dozen hands were on her, yanking her out of harm's way as the driver slammed on his brakes.

"I— thank you," Susan managed to gasp, looking down at her skinned and bleeding knees.

"Here, let me help you," a kindly British voice said. She looked up to see a slim man in a gray topcoat reaching out his hand to help steady her. "Are you staying at the hotel?"

"Yes." She grimaced in pain.

"I'll help you back inside and we'll see about those knees. You almost got yourself killed."

"The crowd just seemed to push me—"

Inside the lobby the Englishman issued a quick command in Japanese. "It doesn't look serious but you should get it cleaned off. I've asked that someone escort you to your room."

She flexed her knees and both of them seemed to work properly despite the pain. "Thanks so much."

He presented his card. "I'm Geoffrey Peters, Miss Holt. With the British Trade Delegation. Please call me if I can be of further service."

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She smiled at him, brushing the loose grime from her hands. "I will. Thanks again."

Upstairs she bathed her sore knees and put on a fresh pair of pantyhose. Luckily she still had time to reach the store by ten. It was not until she was halfway across the street, remembering the kindness of Geoffrey Peters, that she wondered how he had known her name.

Takeo Keio was awaiting her in his office on the seventh floor of Fuji Star, a massive department store filled with wonders Susan could barely imagine. After exchanging traditional gifts and sipping tea served by Rumiko, his pretty secretary, they set off to tour the store together.

"Did you take the escalator to my office?" Takeo asked.

"I was running a little late," she admitted. "I took the elevator." She told him about falling in the street.

"That is terrible! You could have been seriously injured or even killed! People here are so thoughtless at times with their pushing. You must avoid our subway tubes at all costs, especially during the rush hour when people are jammed together like cattle." He took her arm gently, as if to protect her. "But come—the first wonder of Fuji Star is at our escalators."

As they approached she saw a small Japanese woman dressed in a traditional kimono standing next to the moving staircase. The woman bowed politely and said something in Japanese. Only then did Susan realize she was looking at a robot, an automaton equipped with an audiotape to supply information. "What did she say?"

Keio smiled proudly. "The ones at the escalators warn women to lift their kimono sleeves so as not to get them caught. Others around the store inform shoppers of special products and sales. I will admit we borrowed the idea of the automatons from Mitsukoshi, our largest competitor."

"It's wonderful!"

"Something for New York, perhaps?"

"Well—the bowing is what gives them charm, and that wouldn't be suitable in American stores."

"Ah yes!" Takeo Keio said. "A different culture."

It was obvious he was withholding the webs for the tour's finale, and they finally reached a small softly lit gallery on the top floor, not far from Keio's office. The sign next to the entrance was in both Japanese and English: *The Strange Webs of Professor Hiraoka.*

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Susan entered slowly, seeing at first only a dozen glass-covered cases positioned on the walls, their contents shrouded in shadow. Then the spotlights went on, all at once, and she stood stock-still, frozen by the beauty and wonderment of what she saw. "These are exquisite," she said softly, as one might speak in church. Each of the cases held a single large spider web, its strands glistening with something like dew. The first web seemed perfect in all respects, the second off-center a bit. They seemed to grow more bizarre, of wilder formation, as she moved around the gallery. Here was one with two centers, and another with a dead fly caught at the end of a funnel-shaped tunnel. All of them glistened in the spotlights, shimmering magically. Susan stood for a moment at each one, even the most outrageous, as if expecting the web's maker to appear in one corner, carefully inching its way toward that dead fly.

"You are impressed?" the Japanese asked her with a proud smile.

"I must have these for New York. They are works of art."

"I cannot negotiate for America. You must speak directly with Professor Hiraoka. I know the prime minister himself has promised to come if he shows the webs in Tokyo next Christmas."

"Where can I find him?" she asked, unable to shift her gaze from the mesmerizing webs.

"He has been coming in every few days to tend to the webs, but tomorrow is the final day of the exhibit. The webs will be packaged carefully and returned to him."

"What tending do they need?"

"These glass fronts lift open and the professor sprays a special moisturizer on the webs. That accounts for their shimmer and dew-like effect."

"Where does he live?"

"Professor Hiraoka teaches at Waseda University here in Tokyo and lives near the campus with his wife and family. If you wish to arrange an appointment it would be my pleasure to place my limousine and driver at your disposal."

"That's very kind of you," Susan replied. "I hate to bother him over the holiday weekend. Do you think it would be all right?"

"Certainly. For most of our people New Year's is a more important holiday than Christmas, but Professor Hiraoka is a Christian. I expect he will spend tomorrow working in his study like any other day."

"I'm surprised you celebrate Christmas at all in a Shintoist and Buddhist country."

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He smiled slightly. "It is a secular holiday here. We have a place for Santa Claus if he helps to sell merchandise."

"Fuji Star has other stores around the country, do they not?"

He nodded. "Twenty-seven in all, although this is the largest. It is a publicly held corporation. I manage only this store, which has enough problems for me these days."

Susan glanced at her watch and did some quick mental arithmetic. Noon in Tokyo meant that it was ten P.M. the previous night in New York. Saul Marx had told her to phone him at home after she'd seen the webs, but it might be a bit late. Better to wait till later and call him at the office. By that time she would have spoken to Professor Hiraoka. "If you would give me the professor's phone number, I could call him for an appointment now."

"Certainly. I have it in my office."

Keio placed the call for her and said a few words in Japanese to the professor. Then he turned the telephone over to her. "Hello, Professor Hiraoka. My name is Susan Holt. I'm from America."

The voice on the other end was strong, with a good command of English. "Miss Holt, it's my pleasure! Takeo has told me about you and your interest in my webs. I feel honored that a great New York store would send someone over here to see them."

"I'd like to speak to you about them, Professor. I know it's the New Year's weekend—"

"Would you be free to come out here this afternoon?"

"Well—yes, of course. Mr. Keio has loaned me his car and driver, so I should have no trouble finding the place."

"Very good. About three o'clock?"

"Perfect. I'll be there."

Professor Hiraoka lived on the outskirts of the city, in a pleasant area where the crush of people and places, railways and highways, finally began to abate. Keio's driver pulled up in front of the house and said he would wait for her. The residence itself was modest, and the door was answered by a young man of around twenty who seemed vaguely familiar. He ushered her into a small study where Professor Hiraoka awaited her.

He was tall for a Japanese, taller than Susan, and wore a black silk kimono that was tied loosely in front, revealing pants and a dress shirt beneath it. He bowed slightly and accepted the wrapped gift she'd brought along. "How kind of you," he told her. "This is my son, Yoichi."

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Yoichi bowed too, and in that instant Susan remembered where she had seen him before. He was the young Japanese in her hotel lobby that morning, the one who had followed her outside just before she was pushed into the street.

Yoichi left them and Professor Hiraoka settled down behind his desk. He was nearly bald and wore tinted glasses that lent a scholarly yet mysterious look to his face. "I consider it a great honor that you have come here to my home."

"Your webs are creations of real beauty. How do you achieve it?"

He smiled. "By trial and error. I read of some experiments in which LSD was given to spiders and caused them to spin fantastic webs. I experimented in my basement workroom with all sorts of drugs and over time worked out the correct combinations for maximum results. I am aware that some people have an intense dislike for spiders, but no one can fail to appreciate the beauty of a magnificent web. Come, I will show you my workroom."

She followed him out to the kitchen where his wife was beginning to prepare dinner. She was a small, pretty woman who hardly looked old enough to have a son of Yoichi's age. "Beware of the spiders," she cautioned Susan as they started down the cellar steps. Obviously her husband's work was something of a family joke.

The Hiraoka's home was one of the rare Tokyo houses with a basement. Professor Hiraoka switched on the lights and Susan found herself surrounded by more of the glass wall cabinets she'd seen at the store. "You'll notice we have air holes and little pegs along the sides to encourage the spiders to start their webs. The pegs can be placed closer together if necessary, though naturally I like the webs to be as large as possible. Once they are spun I spray them with this special solution which causes them to glisten in the light and also strengthens the web somewhat."

"Could they be flown to America in these display cases?"

He hesitated for a moment. "I believe so, if they were well padded and insulated against the cold. A ship might be a bit smoother but it has the disadvantage of taking much longer. The webs should be inspected and sprayed every few days."

"Do the spiders accompany them?"

"No, no," he said with a chuckle. "Their work is finished. But I should go with them. Would this be a problem?"

"Of course not. We were planning on it. Certainly we'd want you to supervise their installation and lighting, just as any artist would."

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"The spiders are the artists. You might say I am merely their manager."

She turned from the webs and inspected the rest of the basement. On one wall was a locked cabinet and he opened it for her. "I obtain the hallucinogens through the university. When I am away I return them. I take no chances on a burglary."

They discussed financial considerations and Professor Hiraoka was quite reasonable. "How long would you want to show my webs at your New York store?"

She took a small calendar from her briefcase. "In our country the Christmas shopping season really starts the day after Thanksgiving. Naturally we have decorations in place before that, but Friday, November twenty-fifth would be the opening day for the display. It would remain in place until Christmas, which is one month. Of course you would need time on both ends to prepare the display and then dismantle it. I would guess six weeks in all. In addition to your fee for the display we would pay living expenses for you and your wife in New York during that time. Would your son be coming too?"

"No, he has other interests."

"This evening I'll phone New York and have them fax me the agreement. I'm sure there'll be no problem over the terms."

They returned to his study. "I will look forward to this. My wife and I have been to New York only once before, many years ago, when I spoke at Columbia University."

Susan was warming to the whole idea. "I'm certain we can get you on some of the television talk shows. You must have humorous stories about spiders getting loose in the house."

"A few," he admitted with a smile.

"You said you read something about spiders on LSD. Is it possible that you also read the English writer Walter Pater? He wrote an essay on the Mona Lisa in which he mentioned trafficking for strange webs, and that's exactly what I'm doing."

"I never read Pater," he admitted, going to a section of his bookcase containing English-language volumes. "But I did read another Englishman, Jonathan Swift. Are you familiar with *Gulliver's Travels?*"

"Of course," answered Susan, who hadn't read it since freshman year in college.

"You may remember here in the third part when Gulliver visits the Academy of Lagado he encounters a professor who fills his room with cobwebs of various hues, achieved by feeding colored flies to

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the spiders that spin them. He also feeds them gums and oils to strengthen the webs. The professor's object is to replace silkworms with spiders capable of producing colored silk strands strong enough to be made into clothing." He handed her the open volume.

The book was an 1865 edition of *Gulliver's Travels* with illustrations by Thomas Morten. It had been published by Cassel, Petter, and Galpin in London. The illustration did indeed show a man with sparse long hair, a beard, and glasses, wearing a ragged kimono, greeting visitors to his cobweb-covered room. Spiders could be seen in many of the webs. The man seemed to be oriental and looked a bit like Professor Hiraoka.

"I'm surprised Swift's satire would be of interest to you."

Professor Hiraoka smiled at her. "And why shouldn't it be? After all, the only nonmythical country visited by Gulliver was Japan."

Susan phoned the store from her hotel room just before midnight. "It's almost the new year here," she told Saul Marx. "I'm celebrating all alone with a glass of champagne."

"Good for you," he grumbled. "We've got another fourteen hours to go. How are you doing with the webs?"

"Perfect! They're really beautiful things. We'll have pictures in every New York newspaper and half a dozen national magazines."

"You met the man who produces them?"

"Professor Hiraoka, yes. He's very nice and most cooperative. He and his wife are looking forward to visiting New York." Quickly she ran over the terms of the financial agreement. "Does that sound reasonable from your end?"

"What about the shipping expenses for the webs? You'd better check into that from your end."

"I already have." She gave him the figures. "And I assume our standard liability policy will cover insurance."

"We usually add a rider for special exhibitions like this."

"Fine. Could you type up the necessary agreement and fax it to me here at the hotel? I'll get Professor Hiraoka's signature on it tomorrow." She gave him the number of the fax machine in her room.

"It'll be waiting for you when you wake up in the morning. You've done a fine job with this, Susan."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. And Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you too."

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She glanced at the bedside clock as she hung up the phone. It was still ten minutes before midnight. Suddenly the phone rang and her first thought was that Saul Marx was calling her back about something.

"Hello?"

"Miss Susan Holt?" asked a male voice with a British accent.

"Yes?"

"I wonder if you remember me. We met outside your hotel this morning. My name is Geoffrey Peters."

"Oh yes."

"I know it's very late, but I assumed no young American woman would retire before seeing in the new year. I'm downstairs in the bar and I wonder if I might buy you a drink."

"I was just getting ready for bed," Susan replied, "but I appreciate the invitation. Thank you. Perhaps another time."

His voice dropped slightly and the tone changed. "It's very important I speak with you about what happened this morning. It was not an accident but a deliberate attempt to kill you."

"I'm sure you must be mistaken," she said, but an image of Professor Hiraoka's son following her out of the hotel loomed large.

"Your life is in danger, Miss Holt. We must talk."

For a split second she considered inviting him up to her room, but immediately dismissed the thought. For all she knew the debonair Geoffrey Peters could be a robber or a rapist. "I'll be down in fifteen minutes," she decided, "but only for one drink."

He was waiting in the bar, seated alone in a corner booth. The television set had finished proclaiming the new year and the bar's few customers were beginning to settle down. Most seemed to be Europeans, though there were a few Americans too. Peters wore a gray suit with a brightly striped vest. Earlier she'd only had the impression of a slim British gentleman. Now she saw that he was probably in his late thirties, with a bit of a twinkle in his eye. Seeing that, she wondered if this was all an elaborate ploy to get her into bed with him.

"So glad you could come," he said loudly enough for anyone who might be interested. "Would you join me in a champagne toast to the new year?"

She saw the open bottle with two glasses. "I just had one in my room, but I suppose another wouldn't harm me."

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He agreed and poured her a glass. "As I told you on the phone, I'm sorry to disturb you so late. But I believe it is vital that you know your life is in danger." His voice had dropped much lower.

"I hope you're just exaggerating."

"I wish I were. You were pushed in front of that taxi this morning by a young Japanese man. I believe he did it deliberately."

She took a sip of the champagne. "Let's start at the beginning, Mr. Peters."

"Please call me Geoffrey."

"All right, Geoffrey. Why were you watching me this morning?"

"I didn't say I was."

"You knew my name. You were watching me just as he was. How do I know it wasn't you who gave me a push?"

He ignored her question and said, "The young man who pushed you is Yoichi Hiraoka, the professor's son."

"I suspected as much," she admitted. "I recognized him when I visited their house today. But why? He didn't even know me."

"Japan has many of the same problems as Germany these days—a resurgence of the kind of right-wing factions that helped bring on the Second World War. Hiraoka's son is active in such a group."

She remembered his father saying simply that he had other interests. "But why would he try to kill me? He'd never even met me. And what business is it of yours?"

The Englishman said quietly, "We were advised of your mission. So was Yoichi's group."

"Mission? What mission?" Susan was growing angry now. "I'm over here to arrange an exhibition of Professor Hiraoka's webs for next Christmas, back in New York."

"How long are you staying?"

"The store is faxing me the agreement overnight. If I can obtain Professor Hiraoka's signature tomorrow I'll take a plane out of here the next day."

"They don't want that agreement signed. That's why an attempt was made on your life."

"What you're saying doesn't make any sense," she argued. "Why should a rightist group care about those webs and what happens to them?"

"We don't know. The only thing certain is that Fuji Star department store has become a focus of their activities. Group members under surveillance are often seen to enter the store and browse around, though they rarely buy anything."

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"Are they shoplifting?"

"No. They've been watched very carefully and they do nothing suspicious."

"Do you work for the Japanese government?"

He smiled slightly. "I'm doing some antiterrorist work for them under contract. That's all you need to know."

Susan finished her champagne. "Thank you for warning me about Yoichi. I'll be on my guard. Good night, Mr. Peters."

He stood up as she left the table. "Happy New Year, Miss Holt."

She slept a bit later the following morning and when she awoke she was surprised to see so many people on the street, even on New Year's morning. Many of the stores appeared to be open. On her way down to breakfast she picked up the contract that had been faxed to her room and reviewed it while she ate. When she was satisfied it was in order she used her fax machine to make several more copies.

Susan could see the Mitsukoshi department store from her hotel and she decided to visit it. Tokyo's largest, it boasted a multistoried entrance hall and a grand staircase with a huge sculpture representing the goddess of sincerity. The escalators, as in Fuji Star, had bowing automatons warning about kimono sleeves. She bought a small gift, a blue cotton *yukata*—a loose-fitting garment that went over the head and tied around the waist, to be worn after bathing or at the beach. It would look good on Russell, if he'd gotten over his anger at her sudden business trip.

On the street Susan was very careful not to stand too near the curb and she kept an eye out for Professor Hiraoka's son, but there was no sign of the young man. With some time to kill before she returned to the professor's home for his signature on the contracts, she decided to return to Fuji Star on the off-chance that Takeo Keio might be at work, even on a Saturday that was New Year's Day. Japanese managers, after all, were notorious for hard work and long hours.

The store was about as crowded as Mitsukoshi's had been, and she was sorry now that she hadn't bought her gift here. She made her way to Keio's office on the top floor and asked his secretary, Rumiko, if he was in.

"Yes," she replied with a smile. "He had a visitor who'd brought him a New Year's gift, but I believe he's free now. Let me see."

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She went to the door of his office, knocked, and opened it. Her short, startled cry brought Susan to her side at once. Takeo Keio was slumped over his desk, his head resting in a pool of blood. He'd been shot through the left temple.

The police took charge quickly. Rumiko, sobbing at her desk, told them what little she knew. A young Japanese man had arrived to see Takeo Keio at eleven that morning, saying he had a New Year's gift for him. There was indeed a gift, a small hand-carved Buddha that sat on the desk just at the edge of the blood from Keio's fatal wound. Rumiko had heard nothing unusual from the office, indicating that a silenced pistol had probably been used.

"They were together about ten minutes," Rumiko said. "Then I went over to the files. As I returned to my desk I saw the young man walking away toward the elevator."

Susan watched while the police searched the office carefully. "A silenced pistol is usually an automatic," the detective in charge explained to her. "We want to find the ejected cartridge case, if the killer didn't take it with him." He spoke good English and smiled to put her at ease. Only his eyes were cold. He'd said his name was Sergeant Shimane.

There was nothing on the desk top except the Buddha and a few of Keio's papers. The wastebasket was empty this early in the day. They went over the carpeted floor and found nothing at first, until one detective felt around the leg of a chair and came up with the cartridge case. Sergeant Shimane examined it carefully and dropped it into a plastic evidence bag.

"Now tell me what you were doing here, Miss Holt," he said.

"I had business with Mr. Keio. I'd seen him yesterday, and I returned to speak with him again today."

"On New Year's?"

"I took a chance he'd be here since the store was open."

The detectives had finished their examination of the office without finding anything else the killer might have left. Photographers and fingerprint men moved in and Sergeant Shimane escorted her outside. Rumiko had recovered enough to telephone the store's main office with news of the killing. Shimane questioned Susan some more, noted the hotel where she was staying, and advised her to contact him before she left the country. Then she was free to go.

With Keio's limousine no longer available, Susan took a taxi out to Professor Hiraoka's residence. The professor's wife answered the

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door and Yoichi was nowhere to be seen. The professor came out of his study to greet her. "I have been looking forward to your arrival," he said, seeming genuinely pleased.

"Before you sign the agreement I'm afraid I must tell you some bad news. I've just come from Fuji Star. Takeo Keio has been shot to death in his office."

"What? What's this you're saying?" He seemed startled by the news. "Who could do such a thing?"

"The police are looking for a young man. I know nothing more about it."

He shook his head. "Terrible, terrible—"

Susan removed the contract from her briefcase. "Professor, there are one or two questions I must ask you."

"Go ahead."

"Have you received any recent threats regarding the display of your webs? Is there anyone who didn't want them shown in America?"

"There've certainly been no threats. Are you implying that Keio's murder is somehow connected with my webs?"

"I don't know. It's a possibility."

"The only one opposed to showing the webs in America is my son Yoichi, who has strange nationalistic ideas at times."

"Is Yoichi here now? I'd like to see him."

"He left early this morning to meet friends."

The professor's wife had been hovering near the study door. Now she entered, to his great displeasure. "Naomi—do not interfere in this!"

But she wouldn't be silenced. "What is this about my son?" she asked. "What has he done?"

"I don't know," Susan said. "I just want to talk to him."

"Those people," she muttered, then switched to Japanese.

They talked, or argued, for some minutes. Finally Naomi left the room and Susan turned to the professor. "What is the trouble?"

"She fears Yoichi is a member of a militant group bent on violence."

"Do you think it is true?"

"I know it is true," he said with a deep sigh.

"I hope we won't have any trouble in New York," Susan said. She produced the contract. "Please sign these. I'll explain anything you don't understand."

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He started reading the contract, pausing now and again for the meaning of some word or phrase. Finally satisfied, he affixed his signature to three copies just as they heard the front door open. "Whose taxi waits outside?" a voice yelled. She knew it was Yoichi.

He entered the room and saw her, throwing down the heavy jacket he'd been wearing. His face twisted with fury as Professor Hiraoka tried to calm him. "You have signed the contract, Father! You have signed my death warrant!"

Naomi Hiraoka appeared behind him, trying to grab her son's shoulders. He fought her off and the professor shouted something in Japanese. It was an angry scene, and Susan wished she was out of there. She felt like one of those helpless flies, trapped in a web she couldn't comprehend.

Yoichi broke free of his mother's grasping hands and ran out of the house with his father's voice shouting after him. He'd left his heavy jacket on the floor and Susan picked it up without thinking. She felt the weight in the pocket and immediately imagined a small gun, the weapon that had killed Takeo Keio. It was not a gun but some sort of remote-control device.

"What's this?" she asked the parents. "Is it for a garage door?"

But Professor Hiraoka and his wife continued arguing, ignoring her for the moment. She dropped the gadget into her purse.

"I must go," she told them, scooping up the signed contracts.

They ceased their argument and Professor Hiraoka tried to regain his composure. "You must excuse us. Being the parents of a rebellious son is not always easy in today's Japan."

"Nor in today's America," Susan sympathized. "Did he know Takeo Keio?"

"He'd met him at the opening of my webs exhibit, of course. Yoichi is often at Fuji Star, for whatever reason."

"Has he been in trouble with the police?"

"I fear so. He has been arrested in demonstrations at the airport and the university."

"What did he mean about this contract being his death warrant?"

"I do not know. He wished me to exhibit the webs at a celebration next December marking the hundredth anniversary of our victory in the Sino-Japanese War, but I was against the idea from the beginning. My webs are works of art, not militaristic celebrations."

Susan stuffed the contracts into her briefcase. "My taxi is waiting. I must be on my way. A copy of the contract will be returned to you

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together with the advance payment agreed upon. We will be in touch about the shipping dates for the webs."

"I would like to travel with them, on the same plane if possible."

"I think we can arrange that. I'll look forward to greeting you and Mrs. Hiraoka in New York next November. And I hope your personal problems are resolved."

He bowed. "Thank you, Miss Holt."

Susan went back to her hotel and ordered a sandwich from room service. The contracts were signed, her job was done. She could be on a flight to New York in the morning. The murder of Takeo Keio was no concern of hers, whether or not Yoichi Hiraoka had pulled the trigger.

Still . . .

She opened her purse for a tip when the room-service waiter arrived and saw Yoichi's remote-control device resting there. She'd forgotten all about it. Pointing it toward the window, she pressed the button on top.

Nothing happened.

She pointed it toward the room's television set and nothing happened.

She sat down and ate her sandwich.

Was it something connected with Fuji Star? Yoichi frequented the store, and Geoffrey Peters had told her that other members of the rightist group did too. Susan walked to the window and stared across the square at it.

One last time, one last visit, she decided. She left the briefcase and contracts in the room but took the remote-control unit with her. Nervously crossing the wide street, expecting to see Yoichi lunging toward her at any moment, she made it to the store without incident. As she entered a greeter was telling customers in Japanese and English, "We will be closing in thirty minutes because of the holiday."

She took the escalator up to the top floor and noticed that a police officer stood guard at the door to Keio's office. Walking down the aisle toward the furniture department, she pressed the remote-control gadget in her pocket. Nothing happened.

This is foolish, she decided. If the purpose of the device was to set off some sort of explosive, she might blow herself up by accident. She headed for the down escalator. The waiting automaton bowed and the mouth on the white doll-like face began voicing a warning

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about kimono sleeves. She pressed the button in her pocket as if to zap it.

Instantly the voice was cut off, overridden by another message in Japanese. Strange.

Customers were beginning to leave the store, streaming down the escalators with their bags. Clerks were cashing up for the day. She waited until no one was near and approached the bowing figure again, activating the remote control in her pocket. Once again the substitute message came from the bowing figure.

"We are closing now," an employee told her, hurrying past.

"Thank you."

She turned, not knowing what to do, when suddenly she saw the Englishman, Geoffrey Peters, coming from the direction of the furniture department. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I heard about Keio's death and came as soon as I could. I understand you found his body, along with his secretary?"

"That's right, and I may have discovered why he was killed. You told me this store seemed to be a focal point for activity by young rightists."

"Yes," he agreed, staring at the remote-control gadget she produced from her pocket. "What's that?"

"I found it in the pocket of Yoichi Hiraoka's coat. Watch this!"

The bowing figure voiced her special message and Peters was taken aback. "This unit overrides the standard taped message with a special message. These rightist youths have been coming here for instructions, triggering this device when no one else was within earshot." He took the gadget and tried it himself.

"Keio was seen doing this and someone killed him."

"Perhaps," Peters said a bit uncertainly.

"What does the message say?"

"Meet me in the gallery after the store closes."

"That's now!"

"I just came from that area and I saw no one."

"Come on," she urged.

He followed her back to the furniture department, to the gallery entrance, and the spotlights came on as they walked past the sign announcing Professor Hiraoka's wonderful webs. Stretched out on the floor beneath the first case was the body of Yoichi Hiraoka.

"He's been shot," Geoffrey Peters told her, kneeling to examine the body. "We're too late."

"The killer can't be far."

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It was clear to her now. She knew what had to be done. "I'll get the police," Peters said, leaving her for a moment.

Susan walked past a white-faced automaton that bowed in her kimono and announced a sale on the second floor. She hurried on, ignoring it. Another blocked her path, bowing, starting to speak as she came out of her bow, and Susan saw the silenced pistol slide from the sleeve of her kimono, coming up fast toward Susan's face.

Then she heard a deafening gunshot behind her as Peters fired and the figure toppled backwards, blood gushing from her shoulder.

"My God!" Susan gasped, frozen with fright.

"It's all right," Peters said, kicking the gun away from the traumatized fingers. "I'll get some of this paint off the face and we'll see who it is."

"I already know who it is," Susan managed to tell him. "It's Takeo Keio's secretary, Rumiko."

Sergeant Shimane and his men were still in Keio's office when they heard the shot and came running. Susan's legs were a bit wobbly as she sat down on one of the chairs. "Call an ambulance!" Shimane ordered one of his men. "What happened here?"

"She killed Yoichi Hiraoka," Peters said, "and she tried to kill Miss Holt here. Yoichi's body is in the gallery."

"Keio's secretary?" the detective asked, unable to believe it. "I just finished questioning her an hour ago!"

"She killed Keio too," Susan assured them. "No doubt with this same gun. We should have known her story about the young visitor with the gift for Keio was a lie. The little Buddha was sitting alone on the desk. When you searched for the cartridge you found nothing else on the floor and the wastebasket was empty." Shimane and Peters both looked blank. "Don't you see? There was no wrapping for the gift! In Japan gifts are always wrapped—it's rude not to! If the killer bothered to bring a gift at all, it would have been wrapped. If he took the wrapping with him he'd have taken the gift too. Rumiko lied about the visitor. After she killed Keio she left the Buddha on his desk to bolster her story, forgetting that she should have left a wrapping too. She's the one who's been doctoring these automatons so they'd deliver special messages to members of the youth group. It was a perfect method of getting instructions to them quickly without the danger of using a tapped telephone."

"And Keio discovered what she was doing?" Sergeant Shimane asked.

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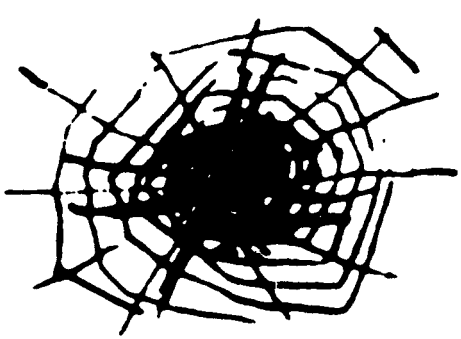
"Of course. That's why she had to kill him. The group wanted Professor Hiraoka's webs to be displayed in Tokyo next year because—" Even as she spoke, the whole plot was unfolding in her mind. "—because the prime minister himself had promised to visit them. There would be an assassination attempt, a bomb planted by Yoichi in one of his father's wooden frames, a signal for an uprising. When the contract was signed and Yoichi knew he had failed, he came here to report to Rumiko. He knew even without his remote-control unit that she'd be waiting in the gallery. She figured his death would be blamed on the stranger who shot Keio, so she used the opportunity to kill him. As Yoichi must have feared, the organization had no further need for him once he'd failed in his mission to win his father's exhibit for the Sino-Japanese centennial. Rather than a co-conspirator, he had become a danger to them."

"She was clever," Peters agreed. "The kimono and the face paint allowed her to pose as one of the automatons if someone came along while she was waiting for a meeting. When she recovers from her wound I think she'll be ready to talk about the others involved."

Susan felt suddenly tired. She'd run down at last. At that moment she only wanted to be out of there and on her way home. As it turned out, she stayed on for Yoichi's funeral service and helped to comfort his parents. Geoffrey Peters was there too, perhaps to comfort her. Trafficking with Eastern merchants hadn't been at all what she'd expected.



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

The long tradition of husband-and-wife mystery writers dates back at least to Marie and Robert Leighton's *Michael Dred, Detective* (1899) and continues stronger than ever. Some couples have written together (Frances and Richard Lockridge, G.D.H. and M.I. Cole, the Kelley Roos team, the Gordons, Skip and Gloria Fickling, Gwen Bristow and Bruce Manning), some separately (Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy, Margaret Millar and Ross Macdonald, John Ball and Nan Hamilton, Richard Lockridge and second wife Hildegarde Dolson, L.J. Washburn and James M. Reasoner, Jonathan Kellerman and Faye Kellerman), some a bit of each (C.L. Moore and Henry Kuttner, Warren Murphy and Molly Cochran, Charlotte and Aaron Elkins).

Among the current glut of legal thrillers on the reprint shelves is a good 1992 first novel by the husband-and-wife journalist team of Diane Henry and Nicholas Horrock, *Blood Red, Snow White* (Pocket, $5.50). The newest books from some other married practitioners of fictional murder, together or separately, follow.

*** A.E. Maxwell, *Murder Hurts,* Villard, $18. The Maxwells, romance novelist Ann and former *L.A. Times* reporter Evan, display their knack for suspenseful storytelling in the eighth novel about Fiddler, a macho sleuth in the Spenser (or even Mike Hammer) mode, and his ex-wife but still-lover, the beautiful and slightly psychic Fiora. When Fiddler sees a chance to avenge the murder years before of his beloved pot-smuggling Uncle Jake, the pair become embroiled in a compelling, action-filled adventure set partly in Mexico and partly in a depraved Hollywood film industry similar to that explored in Robert Campbell's *La-La Land* series.

*** Maan Meyers: *The Kingsbridge Plot,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $18.50. Annette and Martin Meyers collaborate on their second novel rooted in American and (like Faye Kellerman's memorable 1989 novel *The Quality of Mercy)* Jewish history. Dr. John Tonneman, returning in 1775 from Britain to New-York (as the city was then hyphenated) to take over his late father's medical practice and position as coroner, finds it increasingly hard to stay neutral in the conflict between the loyalist Tories and the rebellious Patriots. The mystery plot, concerning a serial killer of redhaired women and a conspiracy to assassinate General George Washington, is nothing special, but the people and their milieu are well drawn. The authors' obviously extensive historical research pays dividends for the reader.

** Annette Meyers: *Murder: The Musical,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime,

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$18.50. Working as a single, half the Maan Meyers team uses her background as long-time assistant to Harold Prince to recount a series of murders surrounding the production of *Hotshot: The Musical.* Some passages of prose and dialogue sparkle, and there are interesting details for theater and New York buffs, but the novel is far too long, and as a theatrical mystery nowhere near the standard of writers like Ngaio Marsh, Simon Brett, and Jane Dentinger. As for the Wall Street headhunting team who front this series, Leslie Wetzon is likable enough, but partner Xenia Smith has to be one of the most exasperating characters in mystery fiction—and one a male writer could never get away with.

*** Marcia Muller: *Wolf in the Shadows,* Mysterious, $18.95. Two of the finest private eye series extant emanate from the same household: that of long-collaborating, recently married Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller. Sharon McCone of San Francisco's All Souls Legal Cooperative looks for vanished lover Hy Ripinsky while weighing an offer from her increasingly corporate-minded employer: take promotion to an administrative job or leave. Though the story loses some of its impetus when Sharon accomplishes the main part of her quest, it regathers its strength for a powerful finish and presents a fresh view of the alien-smuggling industry along the Mexican border in both its practical and moral aspects.

*** Bill Pronzini: *Demons,* Delacorte, $19.95. The Nameless Detective, also of San Francisco, is hired by the wife of architect Victor Runyon to identify the mysterious seductress who has him so obsessed. It turns out the elusive Nedra Merchant has left a whole string of love slaves in her wake, including a lawyer ex-husband and a prominent Bay Area political figure. A troublesome patch in Nameless's relationship with Kerry Wade, plus the absence of his former business partner Eberhardt, have him even more melancholic than usual, and regular readers will follow his quest with real concern. The novel is about average for the series, which leaves it towering over most of the competition.

*** Robert Irvine: *The Great Reminder,* St. Martin's, $17.95. Salt Lake City private eye Moroni Traveler is asked by a dying World War II veteran to locate a German prisoner of war who vanished while working in Utah a half century ago. The series regulars—Traveler's gravestone-obsessed father Martin, street preachers Mad Bill and Charlie Redwine, boyhood pal and L.D.S. official Willis Tanner, Prophet's niece Lael Wooley, and the ubiquitous statue of Brigham Young —are all present in a novel with the humor, color, and emotional resonance Irvine's readers expect. (As *EQMM* readers know, wife Angie Irvine is also a published mystery writer of formidable talent.)

*** W.W. Lee: *Outlaw's Fortune,* Walker, $19.95. Old west private eye Jefferson Birch goes after train robber Tom Hogan in his fifth case, a brief and solid traditional western with all the requisite action and period detail, though with less mystery and detection than I'd anticipated.

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(Lee's husband, cartoonist Terry Beatty, collaborates with Max Allan Collins on the *Ms. Tree* comic book.)
*** Leo Bruce: *Murder in Miniature: The Short Stories of Leo Bruce,* compiled and with an introduction by B.A. Pike, Academy Chicago, $20. Most of these twenty-eight stories are from 1950s issues of the *London Evening Standard,* and they resemble the short-short detective tales and twist-in-the-tail crime vignettes created for that market by many other top British writers. At their best, they are very near the Michael Innes or Edmund Crispin standard, though Bruce (Rupert Croft-Cooke) was better at novel length, where his talent for characterization complemented the clever puzzles. Ten stories about the comic Sgt. Beef, remarkably fully plotted for their length, give the best value. Pike's learned and thorough introduction on the author's life and work is excellent, though it doesn't note that two of the stories, otherwise dissimilar, turn on exactly the same gimmick.
*** Lindsey Davis: *The Iron Hand of Mars,* Crown, $20. The fourth novel about Roman sleuth Marcus Didius Falco, more an adventure than a detective story, takes him to Roman Germany and Germania Libera, officially to find out what happened to a missing legate and unofficially to seek his missing lover Helena Justina. Though Falco's narration and his relationship with Helena retain their charm, and there are plenty of good scenes and character touches, the novel is less impressive than its predecessor, *Venus in Copper* (1992), in part because of an overdose of undigested (and non-essential) history lessons.
*** Lisa Scottoline: *Everywhere That Mary Went,* HarperCollins, $4.99. Attorney Scottoline agreeably combines two subgenres of the extensively pigeonholed contemporary mystery: law-firm thriller and woman-in-jeopardy. Philadelphia lawyer Mary DiNunzio, recently widowed and battling for a partnership, is threatened by anonymous notes and crank phone calls. The narrative and characters sparkle as the main character's sense of humor persists despite the grim events. Both the whodunit and Mary's professional and religious conflicts grip the reader despite the novel's slightly excessive length.
** Nancy Taylor Rosenberg: *Interest of Justice,* Dutton, $21. Why is this entry's effort to combine legal thriller with romantic suspense so much less successful? There is practically no humor; the prose lacks flair or flavor; and heroine Lara Sanderstone never seems convincing as a judge. On the plus side, the police work is more authoritatively depicted than the lawyering—Rosenberg was a police officer—and the story is decently constructed with a pretty good whodunit surprise.

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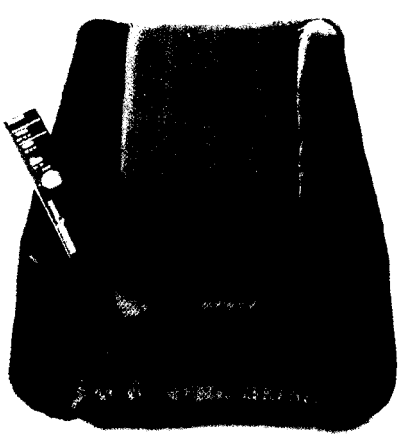

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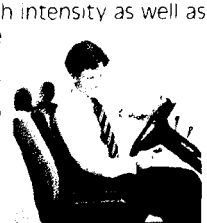

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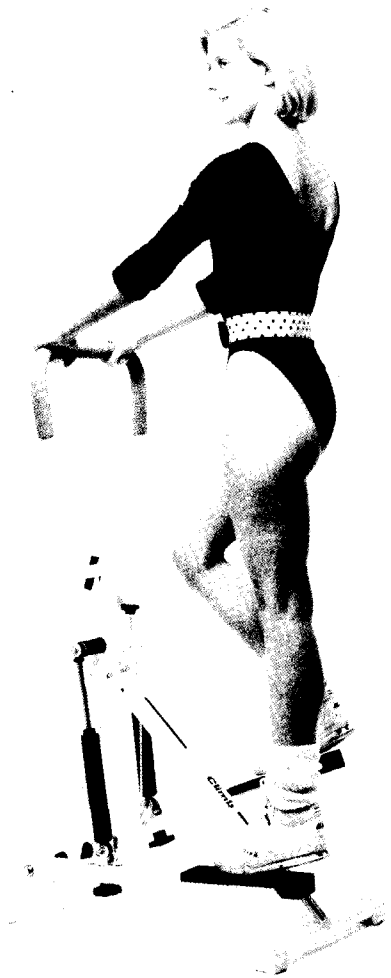

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

This month and next EQMM *is pleased to present short fiction from Readers Award winner Peter Lovesey. Fans of his longer work will want to take a look at his new novel* Diamond Solitaire *(The Mysterious Press).*

YOU MAY SEE A STRANGLER

by PETER LOVESEY

Helen's mind was made up. Three times today she had got to the point of picking up the phone to call the police. She had pressed the first two numbers of the emergency code, then stopped, her finger poised over the third. Some loss of nerve had impelled her to hang up.

This time she would not falter. She stretched out her hand.

The phone bleeped before she touched it. Reacting as if she had disturbed a snake, she backed against the wall.

Outside in Carpenter Avenue, the kids from next door were skateboarding. Bees were plundering the lavender bush. Her neighbour Sally walked by on her way to the art class. Sally modelled nude for five pounds an hour and thought nothing of it. She was Helen's closest friend, a free spirit, unencumbered by her four kids. Before the firstborn arrived, Sally had organized a babysitting circle. Helen could discuss anything with her. Or almost anything. Cool, liberated Sally wouldn't fathom how any woman could be afraid to pick up a phone.

She braced herself. "Yes?"

"Helen?"

"Speaking."

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"So you don't know who this is." The voice was difficult to place. Female, youngish, with a trace of the north. There was background noise of voices laughing and talking animatedly, and music.

"I— I'm sorry. Your voice is familiar, but . . ."

"Come on, you can do better than that, love. Picture a blousy dame with pink-rimmed specs and a blond ponytail."

She dredged the name from her troubled mind. "Immy." Imogen had been her mainstay through that dreary history course at university. "It's over ten years. It must be."

"Eleven this June since we chucked our course notes into the Avon and got totally Brahms and Liszt. Remember? How are things with you, Helen? You don't sound too chipper from here."

"It's nothing."

"An off moment? What's your news? I know there's a man in your life now. Nelson, am I right?"

"How do you know that?"

"From the Christmas card you sent one year. You caught me out. I didn't think we were the sort who sent cards."

"That was the only year I sent."

"Properly hitched, are you?"

"Yes."

"Kids?"

"No." Helen made an effort to switch the questioning. "How about you, Immy? Did you marry?"

"Me? Can you imagine it? I lived with a footballer for a bit. He was the striker for Manchester City Reserves, whatever that means. All the training kept him really warm, 'specially on those freezing nights in January. Talk about cozy. I didn't use the electric blanket all winter. But he got sweaty when the weather improved so I blew the whistle. That's meant to be a joke, sweetie. You're supposed to fall about laughing."

"Sorry."

"You would have laughed in the old days. You *are* down. It isn't your health, is it?"

"I'm fine." Helen was trying to decide whether this call from Imogen was just for the chat or whether a visit was imminent. In her present crisis she couldn't face doing the hostess bit, not even for Immy. "Where are you speaking from?"

"Got you worried, have I?" Imogen said, laughing.

"Of course not."

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"Go on—you've got a mental picture of me standing on your doorstep with two enormous suitcases and a dog."

"Normally I'd love to see you, but . . ."

"It's all right, kiddo, you can relax. Put your feet up, wash your hair, have nookie with Nelson on the bearskin rug. I'm not about to descend on you."

"You're just as daft as ever," Helen said, trying to sound matey and not succeeding. "Where *are* you speaking from? It sounds like a party there."

"The mental picture gets worse—two suitcases and a dog and a carload of drunks with funny hats. I said relax. There's no way I'm going to make a nuisance of myself."

"The last I heard you were back in the north."

"And so I am. Granadaland. Back to my roots. I'm a television researcher. The history degree got me in, but I make sod all use of it. I don't know why they keep me on."

Manchester. At least two hundred miles away. While Imogen was outlining the pleasure and perils of TV research, Helen's thoughts became less guarded. The voice from the past, chattering freely, confiding failure as readily as success, revived that time in their second year when they had opened their minds to each other. Talking to Immy had been a balm at that vulnerable stage of her life. She had kept nothing back.

Then wasn't this a God-sent opportunity? All the reasons she had for not confiding in Sally next door didn't apply to Imogen. Immy was remote now, eleven years and two hundred miles away. Remote, yet close in spirit. A sympathetic ear. No, that wasn't the point—it wasn't sympathy she wanted. An understanding ear. Immy understood her. She might even know what to do.

"Now what about you, poppet?" Imogen ended by saying. "What's your news?"

"Mine?" In her anguish Helen covered her mouth with her hand and pressed her fingers into the flesh under her cheekbones.

"Helen, it's bloody obvious I must have got you at a difficult time," Imogen said. "Typical of me, wittering on like that. Look, I'll call back another day."

"No. No, I want to talk," Helen managed to say. "God knows, I want to talk. It must be fate that you called."

Concern flooded into Immy's voice. "Darling, what is it?"

Helen started by saying, "What would you do if . . . ?" and then switched to a blunt statement. "Immy, I believe Nelson is a murderer."

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She heard the intake of breath from Imogen. The background voices shrilled and giggled inanely.

"I know it must sound crazy spoken cold like this. You must have seen all that stuff in the papers about the Surrey Strangler, the man who killed those women. I think it's Nelson."

When—after another pause—the voice at the end of the phone responded, it was compassionate, but sceptical, with the tone of a mother attempting to coax the truth from her child. "Helen, how do you know?"

Helen made an effort to sound rational. Now that she'd confided her appalling secret, she had to convince Immy that she was still sane. For a start she needed to convey something of Nelson's personality. She described how she had met him four years ago in the cinema queue for the latest James Bond, how he had offered to keep her place when the rain started tipping down, just when she was about to give up for the sake of her hair. He'd got drenched, along with the others who'd kept their positions, but she'd been able to shelter in the cinema entrance. And when they'd finally got their tickets he hadn't done the expected thing and used his gallantry as a ploy to sit beside her. (She was doing her best to be just to Nelson.) He hadn't forced the pace of their relationship at all. He'd found a seat a couple of rows behind her and they'd only spoken in the foyer as they came out. She'd caught his eye and smiled and only then had he asked her to join him for a coffee in the pub across the street. That was how tentative his first approach had been.

"He isn't dishy, or anything. I mean, he isn't ugly, but you wouldn't look twice at him. He's about average height, dark, with a dent in his nose from falling off his bike when he was a boy. What appealed to me was his personality. Immy, he gave me this wide-eyed look—his eyes are brown, by the way—like he'd just arrived from another planet and never seen a woman before. It made me go quite dopey. From the beginning he treated me like someone special, as if I was the first girl he'd ever known. He still does. That's what makes this so creepy. He's never hurt me or anything, never been violent in any way. If we have a row, as everyone does from time to time, he just goes out of the room until we both see how ridiculous it is to fight."

"What makes you think he . . . ?" Immy declined to supply the rest.

"The dates, the places. Each of those women was killed within thirty miles of here. It's happened each time on a night when Nelson

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got in really late—I mean well after midnight. He spends ages in the bathroom showering—I hear the tank filling in the loft—and then he sleeps downstairs on the sofa. When I ask him about it in the morning he says he didn't want to disturb me after getting in so late."

"Do you ask him why he got in late?"

"Clients, he says. He's a sales rep for a firm that makes computer games. Sometimes he has to see people in the evenings."

"Does he tell you which client he's been with? Maybe you could check in some way."

"It's not so simple as that. He doesn't go in for talking about his work."

"And you say all the dates fit?"

"Yes."

"Listen, I never read things like that in the papers. How many women has this guy killed?"

"Three."

"It could be coincidence. Has Nelson been out other evenings when a woman wasn't killed?"

"Never so late. Generally he's back by eleven at the latest. And he hardly ever takes a shower before going to bed."

"But is that all you've got to go on? Just the dates? I mean, these poor women must have fought the guy who attacked them. They were raped as well as strangled, weren't they? Have you noticed scratches, marks, any signs?"

"There was a scratch down the side of his face a few months ago, but I can't say exactly when it got there. I didn't have these suspicions then. Nelson said he got clawed by a cat."

"A cat?"

"In a pub. He picked it up and it scratched him."

"Have you looked at his clothes? What about spots of blood, hairs, and so on? Scent?"

"I tried to find his shirt last Wednesday, after that nurse was killed in Dorking. He got in terribly late, like the other times. Next morning when I heard on the radio what had happened, I looked in the laundry basket, feeling rather sick at what I was doing, and found that the shirt he'd been wearing wasn't there. It wasn't in his room either. Nor were his underpants. I think he must have got rid of them somehow. They weren't in the rubbish sack. Immy, did you see the detective on the television news speaking about it? He said someone must be withholding information, someone who suspects

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that the man they live with could be this murderer. He said by remaining silent they could have the deaths of more women on their conscience. I've got to speak to them, haven't I?"

Imogen sidestepped the question. "You won't mind if I ask a personal question?"

"What is it? Go ahead."

"What's the sex like with Nelson?"

Helen had always found it difficult to talk about such things. If anyone but Imogen had asked her that question she would have slammed down the phone. "He's never tried to force me, if that's what you're getting at."

"But do you allow him to make love to you?"

She saw the drift. "I'm not frigid, for God's sake. I mean it was never *that* passionate, and when it happens it's sometimes more like a duty than a pleasure, or it is for me, but we do sleep together, yes."

"So the satisfaction isn't there?"

"Did I say that? I suppose it's true." Not for the first time, Helen found herself wondering whether she was partly to blame. She wasn't experienced or comfortable as a lover. She hadn't the confidence to be anything but passive. Since the latest episode she couldn't imagine herself wanting Nelson ever again.

Through the net curtains she could see the accountant who lived at the end house. He always got back from the city about this time. Several paces in the rear came his Vietnamese wife. Each day she walked to the station to meet him and trail respectfully home behind him, carrying his briefcase. Most couples' relationships aren't paraded so obviously.

"If you go to the police, that's the end of your marriage," Imogen said. "Even if he's totally innocent, the point is that you believed this ghastly thing was possible. That's a betrayal in itself."

Helen was silent.

"Do you really want my advice, love?"

"Immy, I do."

"You're sure he wouldn't hurt you?"

"He never has."

"Then I think you owe it to Nelson to talk to him."

"Tell him what I believe?"

"If I were faced with this, I hope I'd have the guts to do the same."

"They issued one of those photofit pictures," Helen said, shrinking from the advice. "I don't think it looks much like him apart from his eyes and hair."

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"So you want to be certain, and the only way is to find out the truth from Nelson."

She wavered. "How can I say such a terrible thing to him?"

"You mean you'd rather say it to the police?"

Inwardly, Helen admitted the truth of this. Until Immy had suggested confronting Nelson, such a course of action had been too hideous even to contemplate. The most she had been prepared to do was to turn Nelson in. Faced with the biggest crisis in her life she had looked for the easy solution, the coward's way.

"Where is he right now?" Imogen asked.

"Out on the road somewhere. He should be back in the next hour or so."

"Then why don't you talk to him when he gets in? If he's innocent—and he could be—it's the only way to save your marriage, if that's what you want."

"I don't know if I can face it."

"You must, poppet, you must. You asked for my advice and that's it." Having delivered it, Immy steered the call to an end with a promise that she would phone back the next day to find out what happened. Helen thanked her and managed to say that they must meet sometime. She put down the phone.

It was seven-fifteen. Generally Nelson got in by eight. Immy had convinced her. Helen started rehearsing what she would say. She could broach it indirectly, claiming that she'd looked for his pink shirt with the red stripes—the one he'd been wearing Tuesday—to put in the washing machine. She could remind him that Tuesday was the night he'd got in really late. His response might give him away. He might even be willing to talk about what had happened. If only it could be so simple . . .

The hour of eight passed. It was getting dark, but she didn't draw the curtains. She stood waiting, staring out of the window. A red Toyota like Nelson's slowed as if to stop, then turned into the drive of one of the neighbours.

She went to make herself some tea and realized when she handled the warm pot that she'd already had two mugs since Immy's call. She'd be awash with the stuff. Instead she did something quite out of character by going to the cupboard where they kept the drinks and pouring herself a gin and tonic. With growing intimations of dread she took up her vigil at the window again.

Another hour went by.

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For distraction she dusted the surfaces in the front room, still in darkness, looking out intermittently for the gleam of headlights in the street. She dusted everything twice, moving the ornaments by touch, like a blind person.

It must have been getting on for ten when she heard the heavy tread of a man in the street. She couldn't see enough to tell if it was Nelson, but her pulse raced faster when she saw the shape of someone coming up the garden path. An explanation leapt into her brain: the car had broken down and he'd had to come home by train.

She waited for the sound of his key in the latch. What she heard instead was the doorbell. He was never without his key.

The light in the hall dazzled her when she switched it on. She blinked as she opened the door.

"Sorry to disturb you, Helen," the man on the doorstep said.

He was a neighbour, Gerald. She stared at him blankly.

"I'm slightly puzzled," he told her. "Sally isn't back. She's always in by now. I wondered if she said anything to you about what she was doing tonight."

Her thoughts had been so focussed on Nelson that it was an effort to register Sally's existence, let alone her movements that day. Finally she succeeded in saying, "I thought she was modelling at the tech. I saw her go past at the usual time."

"Have you spoken to her at all today?"

"Er—no."

"Maybe she's gone for a drink with somebody in the class," said Gerald. "I wouldn't think twice about it normally, but you can't be too careful these days, you know?"

She gave a nod. She knew what was on his mind. There was no need to say more.

Gerald repeated his apology and left. After she'd closed the door, Helen wondered whether she should have offered to babysit, giving Gerald a chance to walk down to the tech and enquire about Sally. Maybe that had been his real reason for calling. She could have gone after him, but she didn't want to be out when Nelson got back. Besides, she told herself in justification, if Sally *was* having a drink with someone from the class, she might not be overjoyed at her husband turning up. Not that Sally was wayward; simply that she'd balk at being treated as if she were in mortal danger.

If the unspeakable had happened, and Sally had met the strangler, what could Gerald do? What could anyone do?

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More than three hours had passed since Helen had been on the point of calling the police about Nelson. The appalling thought occurred to her that if Sally had met Nelson as she was leaving the tech, she might easily have accepted a lift. Sally knew Nelson. She'd assume she was safe with him. The words of that detective on the television taunted Helen. *"Someone out there knows this man. By remaining silent, they put more women in danger. If they have any conscience at all, they should come forward and prevent another murder."*

Instead of listening to Immy, she should have spoken to the police. Immy had been wrong, catastrophically wrong. She hadn't considered the possibility that if Nelson was the strangler, he might kill again tonight.

But it was wrong to blame Immy. The responsibility was her own. She, Helen, should have sensed the dangerous flaw in the advice.

Nelson finally got in at ten to one. He hadn't abandoned the car, apparently. He closed the garage doors quietly—furtively, Helen thought—and let himself in. He was clearly startled when she turned on the light.

"I thought you'd be in bed."

"I thought I'd wait," she said in a flat voice.

"Is something the matter?"

"You tell me, Nelson. Look at you. Your hand is bleeding."

Two long scratches were scored across the back of his right hand. He covered them with his left. His tie was twisted askew and there were buttons missing from his shirt front. "I need a drink," he said.

She followed him into the front room and watched him help himself from the whisky bottle.

"You haven't even pulled the curtains," he remarked. It seemed to matter to him that they should not be seen from the street. His right hand went up to the cord and tugged at it, displaying the scratches.

Helen said, "I was looking out for you. I didn't expect you to be so late."

"I can't predict what's going to happen."

She found herself saying, "Maybe a psychiatrist could."

The hunted look that was already in Nelson's eyes gave way first to horror, then, unexpectedly, to tears. He bowed his face and covered it with his hands. He was sobbing.

Helen had no need of her strategies, the questions about the times he'd been late before, and the missing clothes. She had tapped the truth.

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And now she had to find out all of it. She still felt safe with him; some instinct told her that he wouldn't attack her, whatever he'd done to those other women. "Where is she, Nelson? Where did you leave her?"

He said in a broken voice, "The river, in the park."

"Ashdown Park?"

He nodded, still sobbing. The local park was just a ten-minute walk away. Sally's children played there often.

"Is she dead?"

"Yes." After a pause he added, "You're right—I'm mentally ill. I was locked up for six years before I met you. I should have told you."

Stunned, she still knew that he was telling the truth. She understood why he'd so often stared at her as if she belonged to another species. She'd allowed herself to be flattered instead of sensing what that wide-eyed regard really meant.

Nelson said, "I'm going to call the police. I've been wanting to call them. Believe me, I planned to call them. That's why I did it so close to home tonight. I was making sure they'd get me, if you can understand."

She took the phone to him and waited while he dialled the number and spoke. He told them who he was and where he lived and what he had done. Then he replaced the phone and told Helen, "They're sending a car."

She said, "I knew it was you. I should have turned you in. I'm always going to blame myself. How could you, Nelson, knowing she had four young children?"

He looked at her without a spark of communication. "Who?"

"Sally."

"Sally?"

"Sally next door."

"What are you talking about? It wasn't Sally," he said. "It was some north-country woman staying in the King's Arms. That's where I picked her up."

Helen registered first that Sally was spared; she must after all have gone out with some people from the art class. Then she played Nelson's words over in her mind. "This woman—what did she look like?"

"About your age. Blond hair and glasses. She didn't know the town. She was something in television. Said she was at a loose end tonight. She'd planned to drop in on an old college friend, only it wasn't convenient." ●

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a *NEW* short story by

DOUG ALLYN

In one of his shorter pieces, Doug Allyn treats a popular theme of Christmas storytelling: a phantom from the past who casts a shadow over the merry-making . . .

PAGEANT

by DOUG ALLYN

"Sigh-alent night, hooly night . . ." the third graders murmured, scuffling their new shoes, nearly drowning out their soft, pure voices. The kindergarten class had belted out "Jingle Bells" with cheery gusto, but I'd noticed that each succeeding class was a bit more subdued than the one before. Perhaps they'd heard the rumors about Santa Claus.

"Look, look, there she is! Hi, Heather! Hi, honey!"

"Grandfather, please," I hissed, tugging on his overcoat sleeve. A few parents seated near us in the balcony swiveled to see what the shouting was about, their smiles a mix of sympathy and annoyance. Down on the gymnasium floor Heather, the light of my life, cringed and tried to shrink into the collar of her sequin-dusted red velvet dress.

"Don't shush me, Karen," Grandfather LeBeau said, brushing my hand away. "I guess she can't see us," he grumbled, resuming his seat. "Can't see us," he repeated loudly, as though I was as deaf as he is.

Please, God, I prayed silently, no scenes tonight, just get me through the holidays with a few crumbs of my sanity. My thoughts were lost in applause as the audience in the small auditorium rose to cheer the third graders' efforts. Heather took her place onstage

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with the fourth-grade class of St. Lazarus Elementary for a group reading of the Christmas story.

She looked self-conscious, I thought. Was her dress too stylish for a parochial school? Still, she seemed luminous to me, her chestnut hair agleam in the footlights, her—

He was gone. My fingertips had unconsciously brushed at Grandfather's sleeve and met only air. The seat beside me was empty. I glanced around, anxiously scanning the aisles nearby for him; the steps were steep and he might—But he was nowhere in sight. Gone. Smothering a groan, I rose and blundered out to the aisle, mumbling apologies all the way.

The balcony was separated from the gymnasium bleachers by a rail. There was only one way he could have gone. I hurried up the concrete steps toward the second-floor exit, pausing for a last, longing glance at the stage before I pushed through the doorway.

The dim, tiled hallway was deserted, echoing my footsteps and the murmur of angelic voices from the auditorium below. The restrooms were marked beneath a hall lamp midway down the corridor. That must be it. I glanced uncertainly at the sliver of light beneath the door marked Gentlemen. He was probably all right, but since he'd started taking his new medication, he'd seemed restless, and sometimes confused . . .

I waited nearly ten minutes, with growing uneasiness. Finally I rapped gently on the oaken door. "Grandfather? Grandfather LeBeau? Are you in there?" Nothing. I rapped again, then tugged the thick door open a few inches.

"Grandfather?"

Suddenly the door was thrust open from the inside by a balding, pudgy gentleman in a dark suit. And a clerical collar.

"Excuse me," I stammered, mortified, "I didn't mean to—"

"Pardon me for not answering the door sooner, madam," the priest said icily. "I was—occupied. What is it you want?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but is there an elderly gentleman in there? My husband's grandfather wandered off during the program, and I thought . . ."

"He's not here," the priest said. "You might try the facilities on the first floor. But I'd suggest you knock a bit longer next time."

"Thank you, I—" He closed the door in my face, mercifully killing my apology. I fled down the stairs, stepped into the gym for a quick look, and spotted Grandfather LeBeau.

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He was standing at the foot of the bleachers at the edge of the gym, talking animatedly with a young woman, or rather talking at her. She seemed to be listening patiently enough, but I knew how he could ramble on and I hurried to the rescue.

I didn't recognize the woman. She was slender, with an oval face framed by straight black hair, unevenly cut. Her muted gray smock was prim enough for a nunnery. I felt a moment of disorientation as I approached. Grandfather was speaking French, or the dialect that passes for it in western Ontario.

"Grandfather?" I said hesitantly. "Really, you shouldn't—"

"Karen," he boomed excitedly, "look, look who I've found! Miss Rogêt, this is my grandson's wife, Karen LeBeau, and Karen, this is Miss Rogêt, my third-grade teacher, from my old school. Saint Marie de la Marais."

I'd already offered the woman my hand before I realized what he'd said, and even then it took a glance into his eager face before I understood that he hadn't misspoken. He was in earnest. I tried to think of a light remark to smooth over the awkwardness, but nothing came. The young woman took my hand and met my eyes with a glance of unruffled sympathy.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. LeBeau," she said calmly, "Mr. LeBeau has been telling me all about you, and Heather, of course."

"I'm sure he has," I said, taking heart from her composure. "I hope he didn't bore you."

"No, not at all," she said, with a faint smile. "We had a nice talk. About old times. I found it—most interesting."

"Miss Rogêt didn't recognize me at first," Grandfather interjected, "but it's been a long time, of course."

"So it has," the young woman agreed, "a very long time."

The Christmas pageant was ending and the audience began to clatter down from the bleachers and shuffle past us.

"Well," I said, managing a ragged breath, "we really must be going. It was very nice to meet you, Miss . . . Rogêt."

"Wait, can't we visit a little longer?" Grandfather LeBeau said. "I almost never see anyone from the old days anymore."

"I'm sure Miss Rogêt has other duties," I said, taking his arm firmly, leading him into the flow of the crowd. "Goodbye, Miss, and—thank you." She nodded, smiling, and then I lost sight of her in the river of parents and relatives rolling out of the auditorium into the gray winter dusk. Large, lazy flakes were tumbling pell-

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mell out of the leaden sky and the bitter wind quickly found the open collar of my coat.

"Karen, that was very rude," Grandfather said, as we made our way down the concrete steps. "Not like you at all. It wouldn't have hurt to talk a few minutes. And shouldn't we wait for Heather? Where's Heather?"

"She's staying over at Connie's, remember? I told you earlier."

"Yes, of course. I forgot. By God, it was good to see Miss Rogêt again. I was one of her best students, you know."

"Yes," I said, "I'm sure you were."

In the car he rambled on about his school days, but I was too busy to pay attention. The parking lot was a slow-motion demolition derby, a hundred vehicles all crawling blindly toward a single exit across lane markers covered with snow. I had visions of being trapped until spring. At some point in the confusion Grandfather LeBeau fell silent. I let the quiet drag on, hoping the spell would pass. Or he'd just forget . . .

"It's funny, you know," he said suddenly. "She's changed so little, and . . ." His voice dwindled. The hum from the heater seemed very loud. And then he groaned softly. "Oh my God," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "My God."

"Grandfather . . ." I touched his sleeve, but he didn't notice.

"It couldn't have been her, could it? She would be . . . much older than I am now. And no one is. No one's older than I am."

"Grandfather, it was just a—lapse. It could happen to anyone."

"Could it?" he flared, turning on me fiercely. "Could it happen to you? Could you mistake a stranger for someone you knew a lifetime ago? Babble like an idiot about . . . God, I feel so ashamed. I'm—answer me honestly, Karen, the truth. Have I done this before? Is my—mind beginning to fail?"

"Grandfather, you're taking three different kinds of pills for your heart now. It's only natural to expect—"

"Dammit, I'm not talking about being a little wobbly in the morning or forgetting my gloves. Senile. That's the word. Or it used to be. They use a new word now. Alzheimer's. Is that happening to me, Karen? I have to know."

"No," I said gently. "I'm sure it's just the medication. And after you have the surgery you won't need it anymore. You'll be good as new."

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"Perhaps my heart will be. But if my mind is going . . . Karen, honestly, I'd rather not survive the surgery. Or not have it at all."

"You have to have it, you know that. And you'll be fine afterwards. You have to be. Heather and I would be lost without you. And as to your failing memory, who remembers when Heather's report card is due? Or what bills have been paid?"

"I do," he conceded reluctantly. "Still . . ." He shook his head slowly in bewilderment. "Sweet Mother of God, if there's an ambulance waiting in the driveway when we get home, don't stop. Whoever that poor woman was, she probably called the police to report an escaped lunatic the minute we were out of sight." And he began to chuckle, a low rumble that built to an avalanche of laughter that swept us both along with it on a wave of relief, whooping, tears streaming. I barely managed to keep the car under control on the snow-slicked street.

"Still," he said, coughing and gasping for breath, "it was good to talk to someone about the old days, even if she thought I was out of my mind."

"I'm sure it was. And maybe she enjoyed it too, *if* she happens to speak French."

"French?"

"Weren't you speaking French when I walked up?"

"Yes," he said slowly, his smile fading a bit, "we were. It's lucky she could *parlez,* or she'd really have thought I was crazy."

"Are you sure she *could* speak it? I mean, did she actually say anything?"

"Of course. That's why it never occurred to me that it wasn't . . . Karen, I swear to you I thought it was her. The physical resemblance, and she answered me in French. And no one speaks Ontario French in this town anymore, not since I was a boy."

"But Grandfather, think a minute. How long has it been since you've seen your third-grade teacher?"

"How long? Well, how old are you in the third grade, eight? Nine? I suppose it's been nearly seventy years."

"I rest my case."

"No, no," he said, smiling, "it's not that simple. You see, I remember those days very clearly. Much better than what happened last year, last week. When you're a child everything shines, everything is new. I remember the old school well. Saint Marie de la Marais, St. Mary's of the Marsh. A grand name, but it was much smaller than the new school. A cracker box really, six classrooms with cast-

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iron stoves, electric lights that popped and hissed and flashed out. Indoor bathrooms, but with no plumbing. Four-holers, we called them." He shook his head, remembering. "It stood just east of where St. Lazarus is today, in the park by the river."

"What happened to the old school?"

He didn't answer. I risked taking my eyes off the road for a moment. He was staring past the windshield wipers into the snowy dusk, but seeing something far off. And his eyes were brimming.

"Grandfather? Are you all right?"

"There was—a fire," he said slowly. "My God. It burned. To the ground. And—several children died. And Miss Rogêt died also. Burned. Trying to save those trapped inside."

"How awful. Were you injured?"

"No—No, I wasn't. My friends and I got out all right."

"How did the fire start?"

He didn't reply, still lost in a mist of memory.

"Grandfather?"

"Oh, it was an old school, wooden. They thought perhaps the wiring . . . No one knows. It was a terrible thing. They built the new school farther from the river. St. Lazarus; he who was resurrected. And in the fall, there was a new teacher. And I . . . put Miss Rogêt out of my mind, I suppose, out of my memory. Until—I saw that woman at the pageant."

"Perhaps the girl you talked to was a relative of your teacher's. That might explain the resemblance."

"I suppose so. Yes. It must be something like that. Michael looked very much like me when I was younger."

"Of course he did," I lied. "Very much like you."

I eased the station wagon into the narrow driveway of the immaculate old clapboard house Heather and I share with Grandfather LeBeau, an arrangement that's continued since I brought Michael home to his beloved lake country after the auto accident that took him from me. We'd often talked of coming back to visit, but after our minute-rice courtship in Toronto, and juggling twin careers, and then Heather . . . We never did make it back. Until it was too late to matter.

And after Michael's funeral, Grandfather took us home with him, to the house my husband had grown up in. And he asked me what I would do now. And I didn't know. I didn't care. So he decided for me. And we stayed on, Heather and I. Only temporarily, of course.

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It's funny, but in those first years, it never occurred to me that he was elderly. He was such a rock for me, so reliable, so strong. It was only recently that I began to notice he was short of breath after our walks, and his skin was losing color. And I nagged him into having a checkup.

They found partial arterial blockage. Serious, but correctable with surgery. They wanted to operate immediately, but Grandfather insisted on postponing it until after the holidays. "I'd hate to miss Heather's pageant, or my last Christmas," he joked. And he couldn't be persuaded otherwise. So Dr. Ramsey prescribed heavy medication, and told me to keep him quiet. And I waited for the holidays to pass like a convict on death row.

And now this. Still, a mental lapse wasn't the end of the world. Perhaps the pageant had been a little too much for him. A quiet evening at home might put things right.

Once inside, Grandfather LeBeau disappeared down the hall to his room without a word. And I felt a twinge of guilty relief. A little nap would be best for him. And for me too.

I plugged in the tree lights in the living room and switched on the radio. Nat King Cole, "O Holy Night." Incense for the spirit.

I wandered into the kitchen, humming along with Nat, and put a saucepan of dark McIntosh cider on the stove to simmer. It began to burble quietly, scenting the air with an exquisite aroma. I was riffling through the spice rack for cinnamon sticks when Grandfather LeBeau stormed in.

He was still in his overcoat, disheveled, smudged with dust. His wispy white hair was awry, and one of his hearing aids was dangling from his eyeglass frame.

"What happened?" I said, my heart sinking. "Where have you been?"

"In the attic," he said angrily. "Here, look at this. It's a photograph of my third-grade class. Look at the teacher!"

I took the yellowed pasteboard from his trembling hands. A faded photograph, children kneeling in a semicircle, the girls in dark smocks, the boys in rumpled jackets with narrow lapels. A young woman was seated in a straight-backed chair to one side, hands folded primly in her lap, her ankles together. She was wearing a blouse with a high lace collar, a dark skirt, button shoes. Did she resemble the woman I'd met at the pageant? Vaguely, I suppose. Our eyes seemed to meet across a gulf of years, but it was only an

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illusion. Her uncertain smile was for a photographer who was buried long before I was born.

I wanted to weep for her. And for myself. She looked so small, so vulnerable. And as alone as I felt at that moment.

"All right, Grandfather," I said, swallowing, "I see her. I—take it this is your Miss Rogêt?"

"Of course it is! You saw her at the school. You spoke with her."

"No," I said firmly, as if explaining to a child, "this isn't the woman we spoke to at the school. She—"

"But this picture's old," he said, snatching the photograph back. "It isn't clear, and anyway you didn't really talk to her. I did and I tell you it was her. She talked about things, things that only she would know about."

"What—things? Do you remember what she said? Exactly?"

"I'm not sure, I was so excited, so glad to see her after all this time—"

"Stop it!" I shouted. He flinched as if I'd struck him. "I'm sorry," I said, struggling to keep calm, "but listen to yourself. Grandfather, you're not making sense. The woman in this picture is *not* the woman I saw at the school. She doesn't even look very much like her. And even if there is a resemblance, it couldn't be her. She's dead. You told me so yourself. She died in a fire nearly seventy years ago!"

There was a crackling hiss behind me as the cider boiled over and foamed down on the burner. I snatched the saucepan off the stove and carried it quickly to the sink, trailing an ugly brown stain across the floor. "Damn," I said softly, pouring the scorched cider down the drain, seeing the safe, stable life I'd found disappearing with it. Damn, damn, damn.

"Of course," Grandfather LeBeau said slowly, "you're right."

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. "Grandfather," I said carefully, "I think we should call Dr. Ramsey. I—don't know how to deal with this. I really don't."

He stared at me a moment, pain transparent in his eyes, then looked away. "Only the doctor?" he said. "Or will you tell him to bring men in white coats too?"

"Of course not, it's just that, the excitement—"

"Karen, you don't understand," he said, more to himself than to me. "I saw her. I spoke with her. In French, for God's sake!"

"But I speak some French too, Grandfather. Lots of people do."

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"I don't mean college French or Quebecois. We spoke in the old Ontario dialect. The French of my youth. No one speaks it anymore, it died out years ago. But she spoke it. Listen, I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. You know me. I'm a practical man, a working man all my life. I understand engines and heavy machinery. I don't believe in ghosts or witches. But I don't have to believe in her. I talked to her. And—Karen, I'm afraid."

"I can understand why you'd be upset, but—"

"No! You don't understand! Mother of God, I killed her! We killed all of them! My friends and I, we—started the fire. A prank, that's all. A little fire in the bathroom the day of our pageant. To make some smoke. To get out of school early. But it went all wrong. So fast. It happened so fast. And children died. And she died trying to save them. Karen, I swear to you we meant no harm, and I've tried to make amends for it my whole life. But you can't erase the stain of so many deaths. And now she's come back. For me."

I almost slapped him. I was that close to the edge. "But even if it was true," I said, forcing myself to sound calm, rational, "it was all so long ago. You were only a child. No one could still blame you for what happened."

"I don't know why she's come," he said stubbornly. "Only that she has. If she's come for vengeance, so be it. But I have to see her again. I have to know."

"To know?" I echoed, trying to align the image of the anguished scarecrow in front of me with the weathered rock of a man I'd come to love. "My God, Grandfather, if you could see yourself, hear yourself." I dropped the saucepan into the sink. "I'm going to call Dr. Ramsey. Maybe he'll know what to do. I just don't—"

"No, please don't do that. They'll take me to the hospital."

"Then will you promise to forget this nonsense and—"

"No, we mustn't, we can't. We have to go back to the school, Karen, to talk to her. Suppose it's not me she's come for? Suppose it's Heather—"

"That's enough!" I snapped, pushing past him. I picked up the receiver of the wall phone, then dropped it as he seized my shoulders, pulling me away from it, thrusting me toward the pantry. "Grandfather, no, please!" He pushed me inside and slammed the door. "Grandfather!"

I hammered on the door, then pushed against it. It wouldn't budge. He'd wedged something against it. "Grandfather, please!" I could hear him rattling around in the kitchen for a moment, then the

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back door slammed and there was silence. Then I heard the station wagon start.

"Oh my God!" I threw myself against the pantry door, slamming into it with my shoulder, feeling it move inch by grudging inch until it opened enough for me to reach around and tip the chair away. I ran to the back door. He was gone, in the station wagon. And he could barely see three meters.

I grabbed my coat and the keys to Grandfather's old pickup truck, and noticed that the silverware drawer was open. Had he taken something? A knife? I couldn't be sure. But I had a terrible sense of foreboding as I clambered into his truck.

I found the station wagon abandoned in the street in front of St. Lazarus, motor running, the driver's door open. I parked the pickup behind it, switched on the emergency flashers, and hurried across the icy sidewalk to the school.

The heavy metal doors were locked. I peered through the narrow window. The dim corridors were deserted, bathed in the scarlet glow of the exit signs. The school was closed for the holidays. Thank God. At least Grandfather couldn't . . . But he said he was coming here.

I scanned the empty streets. The wind was gusting, sending snow devils swirling, dancing in the haloes of the streetlamps. They were the only moving things for as far as I could see, not a car, not a single person. No one. Snowflakes were melting on my face, slithering beneath my collar, a chilling reminder of how bitterly cold it was. I had no hat, no gloves, and I was sure Grandfather LeBeau hadn't either. Dammit, where was he?

I started walking toward the side door, clutching my collar closed, my head bowed to the wind, and realized I was following footprints. There were fresh tracks in the new-fallen snow, leading behind the school, toward the park. And the marsh.

The old school. My God, he'd meant *his* old school.

I hurried toward the park, slipping on the icy sidewalks, buffeted by the wind. I paused at the gate, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dimness. The park was small, with a narrow walking path that wound along the riverbank, some shrubbery, a phone booth, a few iron benches. The only light was the wan glow of a mercury lamp above a small marble fountain in the center. I walked in cautiously, my heart pounding, afraid of the darkness, and what I might find.

And then I saw him. There was a flicker of movement just beyond the ring of light, a shadow disappearing into the trees.

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"GRANDFATHER!"

I plunged into the woods after him, calling, but he didn't answer. Skeletal limbs clawed at me out of the dark, scratching my face, clutching at my clothing. And then I tripped and sprawled headlong in the snow.

I sat up slowly, dazed, and looked around, trying to get my bearings. It was hopeless. The trees were a ghostly choir of spectral shapes, shadows among shadows. I'd never find him in here. I had to get help. I turned and stumbled back toward the park light through a gauzy haze of falling snow. And found him.

He was sitting in the shadow of the phone booth, head bowed, hands folded in his lap, his wispy hair dusted with diamonds of ice-melt.

"Grandfather?" He looked up slowly as I approached. And managed a wan smile. I touched his cheek with my fingertips. "Grandfather? Are you all right?"

"Did you talk to her?" he said dreamily. "I saw you run after her. She had to leave."

"No, I—I didn't. Grandfather, I have to get help."

"I've already called them. 911. They're coming." And as if in answer, I heard the distant wail of a siren drawing closer.

"I have to go to the hospital. Should have gone when you wanted me to, but . . . I was afraid. And that's why she came back to the pageant. To tell me it was time to stop punishing myself. It's the season, you see. For gifts, and forgiveness. And whatever happens at the hospital, I'm not afraid anymore."

"Grandfather—"

"Please," he said. "We'll talk later. I'd like to rest now." His head drooped against my shoulder, and for a moment I thought . . . But his breathing was deep and even. And he looked better than he had in years.

The ambulance attendants asked me if I wanted to ride with them, but I couldn't. My car was still in the middle of the street. I said I'd be along soon and they said not to worry, they'd take good care of him.

I glanced around as I trudged out of the park. He'd been hallucinating, of course, because of the medication. In the new-fallen snow, the only tracks were Grandfather's and mine. He'd needed to see her, and so he had. And I'd been chasing the shadows of my own fears. Imagination, nothing more.

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But at the gate, I hesitated, listening. Voices, singing in the distance. Probably just a radio. It was the season, after all. And then it was gone. But for a moment I heard them quite clearly. The high, pure voices of schoolchildren, caroling. In French. Old Ontario French. But it was only a trick of the wind. It must have been.

DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY CRIMES IV

Georgie Porgie

by GLORIA ROSENTHAL

Georgie Porgie pudding and pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry;
That was a sex crime, you'll allow,
And Georgie's in the slammer now.

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1993 EQMM READERS AWARD

When the *EQMM* Readers Award was instituted in 1985, it was intended not only to give readers an opportunity to honor the authors of their choice, but to give the editors of the magazine a chance to see what readers were responding to, and what types of stories they would like to see in coming issues. Every year when the ballots start coming in, they are the first things to be opened in each day's mail. We in the editorial offices sit on the edge of our chairs wondering whether your judgments will agree with ours. Often they do, but once in a while our discriminating readers pick out a gem that had not been included on our own list of favorites. These can be the most exciting choices of all, for they may cause us to look again at stories whose full merits we might not have appreciated.

We hope you will take the time to cast your vote in this ninth year of the balloting. The *EQMM* Readers Award has become a prize coveted by even the most celebrated authors, which makes it especially important that it represent the judgment of as wide a segment of our readership as possible.

Due to the small number of reprints included in the magazine in 1993, we will not be giving a special award in this category, and stories that have seen previous publication in the United States will not be eligible. (You can determine this by looking at the copyright line beneath each story.) Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for only one or two, if you like. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner.

You may want to refresh your memory of this year's selections by referring to the index on pages 153-156 before turning to page 108 to mark your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address on page 108, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline. Your contribution to determining the winner will be received with pleasure.

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The 1993 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1994 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-size stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot, if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1993 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail To: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
1540 Broadway
New York, NY 10036

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While a student at the University of Michigan, Jim Allyn received the Hopwood Award for novel writing, yet this is his first published work of fiction. The author is a navy veteran who has worked as a science writer and is currently the Director of Public Relations and Marketing at St. Francis Hospital in Evanston, Illinois. He is also the younger brother of EQMM *contributor Doug Allyn. . . .*

THE TREE HUGGER

by JIM ALLYN

My U.S. Forestry Department pickup bumped along the rutted logging road that climbed steadily upward into the bright blue Montana sky. I was feeling uneasy, and it wasn't from the bumpy ride. A year ago I'd passed this way and there had been a forest here.

I lurched out of the sea of stumps and entered a huge expanse of rough ground that served as headquarters for the Cambridge Wood Products operations in this section. All the stumps had been bulldozed into piles like wooden corpses with their root-arms sticking up in every direction. Skidders, monster trucks, cats, and front-end loaders were parked here when not in use. Now most of the men and equipment were gone, scattered into the midmorning woods.

The road stayed level and I passed into a towering wall of lodgepole pine. Tag's battered pickup was there, and I pulled up behind it. As usual, he was off cutting by himself, which was against the rules of course. Logging companies always want their men working in pairs in case of an injury. A chain saw cranked up nearby and I headed for it.

He was climbing a downed lodgepole with his heavy, American-made chain saw, one of the few left around. The chips were flying and the air was filled with the fragrance of pine and gasoline, and the roar of the saw.

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I waited for him to notice me. It's not a good idea to surprise a guy who's swinging something that can rip a killing chunk out of either of you in one startled moment. He saw me. His saw coughed to a halt. He tossed his hard hat down, slowly spread his arms, and stretched mightily, shaking the chips and sawdust from his gleaming, shoulder-length black mane, a touch of Blackfoot back there somewhere.

A soiled red bandanna hung from his neck. His green, threadbare buffalo-plaid shirt was dark with sweat. Baggy camo fatigues were cinched tight by a wide black belt with an egg-sized silver and turquoise Navaho buckle. A slim, sinewy six-three, William Taggart cut quite a figure.

"Grab my brew," he said, pointing toward the U.S. Marine medic's bag he used as a kit. I brought the bag to him and we gently low-fived it, letting our palms rest together for a moment. He poured me a hot cup and the steam, carrying just the slightest hint of Canadian Club, rose into the brisk October air.

"Two things I didn't want to do today," I said. "Come up and see you, and drive over to Elk Lake tonight to talk to the City Council and its gallery of concerned citizens."

"What's up at Elk Lake?"

"We're going to issue permits for clearcutting the West Ridge."

"The tree huggers will be out in force. Doc be there?"

"Yeah. We'll have our usual debate. He's got something new every time now. He's the only guy in Montana who can quote Clinton's plan chapter and verse. I find it harder and harder to argue with him." Doc Redmond spoke for the Wilderness Society at all public hearings.

"Hey, this isn't a home for owls. This is a timber factory. A renewable resource." He smiled as he said it, knowing I'd react.

"Yeah, and even if the companies can reforest it after the erosion, it'll come back about as much like a forest as a corn field is to a mountain meadow."

"Well, we both just do our jobs."

"It's not the first time," I said evenly. "Only when's that part about being older and wiser kick in? Seems like we're always following orders and then wondering what the hell we were following them for."

Tag and I had joined the Marines together and had remained side by side for the four-year tour. Our duty had culminated with Operation Just Cause, which the grunts quickly labeled, "Operation

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Just Because." It was a sudden, high-tech little war that killed about fifty Americans and a thousand Panamanians before people stateside had finished breakfast.

"Speak for yourself, pal. You always were a heavy thinker. Me, I just go with the flow." Tag sighed, and we sat nursing our hot coffee in that wonderful October light.

Tag had obviously been at this site for a few days. He had started at the outer edge of the hillside and worked in, clearing a gigantic window that looked out upon the valleys and mountains beyond. Groves of yellow aspen, patches of red maple, and umber oak, the constant, variegated greens of pine, spruce, cedar, and hemlock, and sand-colored scars from clearcutting erosion, all spread out before us in an infinite panorama. Sometimes the beauty froze you in your tracks.

"Doesn't it bother you, Tag?"

"What?"

"The owls, all of it. You know."

"Nope."

"Don't you ever think about it?"

"Nope. Look what thinkin' about it has done for you."

"Can't help thinking it's all tangled up together—the whales, the owls, off-shore drilling, your chain saw . . ."

"Sure it is. We're on top, that's all. The owls and the rest are on the bottom. They count, but not much. We cut down trees, drill and spill, pave things over, drive to work, eat, buy lumber, drop bombs, get divorced, whatever—and don't care much about what's on the bottom."

"Okay, but that doesn't make it right."

"Maybe not, but it's still plain as day, even if it don't make sense. Look, just draw your pay like I do. We're not responsible for how things are."

"Maybe you're not. But I'm supposed to be some kind of guardian. Or at least I thought I was. And the Department's issuing the permits."

"Jesus! I was havin' a pretty good mornin' until you showed up. No wonder you don't want to go up to Elk Lake." He turned his thin face to me. It was all angles. Striking, smooth, well-balanced angles. "But you said you didn't want to come see me, either. Now, what'd I ever do to you?"

I searched for a way to start. New territory.

"Come on," he said. "What the hell's going on?"

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"I was looking at a stand over in the Kedgwick Hills the other day," I said. Tag shifted his feet and looked away. "We're thinking about doing some selective cutting up there. Anyway, you know whose house sits down below Kedgwick, there by the creek?"

Tag was silent. He was looking down.

"Saw your truck, Tag. Glassed it. Glassed other things, too. I know it was you. Have you taken up repairing home appliances? You start messing with Sharon Long at this late date and you're messing with big trouble."

"Messing isn't the right word," he said softly.

"I can come up with a few more real quick."

"Whoa, you back up, buddy, and I mean now." He glared at me.

My instincts told me to drop the whole thing right then, but I forced myself to go on. Sharon Long was the daughter of Ernie McKinnie, the local sheriff, and wife of John Long, one of Ernie's deputies.

"John's the real thing. He'll use his piece under the right circumstances and you're sure as hell setting up the right circumstances. Have you forgotten what it's like to be around angry men with guns?"

Tag was just gazing off into the distance. He pushed brown fingers through his long black hair.

I kept going. "Look, you remember when we were kids cutting over at Powder River? Remember when John charged his dozer like a war pony into those four hung-up bull pines? Those big widowmakers could have come crashing down anywhere, including on top of him. He could have been pasted all over the seat. You remember that? He's the wrong guy to fool with, let alone Ernie. Sharon's daddy may not be as hard as he used to be, but that's not a popsicle on his hip."

"John backed out, stayed home. The son of a bitch moved in on Sharon while Noriega's best was trying to shoot my butt off."

"I know. . . . Well, we might have stayed home, too, if we had to do it over again." Tag, John, and I had grown up together. Inseparable. Hunted every inch of the Bitterroot and even planned to join the corps as a trio. But only two of us did.

"I sure as hell would have stayed home if I'd known what he was going to pull," Tag said. He smiled. "But maybe the game isn't over."

I stared at him until his smile faded and he grew uncertain.

"Tag, I'm pretty sure John knows."

"No way," he said emphatically. "Why do you think so?"

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"While I'm glassing you, I catch a flash of red just a little up and east. Just above the house. I watch it for a while. Cherry top. It's a cop. Just sitting there. I was there over a half-hour. It was still there when I left and so were you. I can't swear it was John. But there's what, maybe six cop cars in this county? One of them will have Sharon's husband behind the wheel and one of them will have her father. You like those odds?"

He was looking at his boots and toying with his red bandanna. One thing I knew: he wasn't frightened.

"Or maybe you do like those odds," I said. "Like the risk, do you? Waiting for Johnnie to break down the door, or his squad car to cruise up while you've got Sharon's dress over her head? How 'bout it? Things been a little too tame for you lately?"

His face was hard and his blue eyes were dead calm. He was a very private man and, best friend or not, I was right on the edge. He searched my face thoughtfully.

"Jesus, Tag," I said urgently. "C'mon."

"I'd only seen her once in the two years since we got out. I walked into church for Bobby's wedding and she was standing there with John. I couldn't see anyone else. It was like everyone in the place had disappeared except for her and John. If a wish could have made me blind I'd have wished it."

"I didn't even know you were at Bobby's wedding."

"I was there all right. For about ninety seconds." His face was grim. He was struggling with the memory. Then he dismissed it and went on.

"Remember when Miss Johnson was in a coma a few weeks back, just before she died?"

I nodded. Miss Johnson was a sweet old maid who'd been patiently trying to teach high-school English to redneck Bitterroot kids for the last forty years.

"Well, I dropped in at the nursing home one evening to see her. I pulled a chair up close to her bed and held her hand, not talking or anything. She was just about gone. I'd been there a little while when I realized someone was standing in the doorway. It was Sharon. Doing the same thing I was, I guess, saying goodbye. We just stared at each other, seemed like forever. Then she comes over and sits on the edge of the bed real close to me. We sit there for a few minutes. It's real quiet, just Miss Johnson's breathing and the sounds from the home, you know, from out in the corridor. Then Sharon puts her hand over mine and Miss Johnson's and starts to cry. Then I start to cry. Like a goddamn baby."

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It was more than Tag had ever told me about a woman. He wasn't the sort who swapped conquest stories in the barracks. That he'd said even this much was a measure of our friendship. But now he meant it to go no further. I gave it one last try.

"Where's all this gonna take you two?"

"Don't know. But it's too late to walk away."

"This is shaky business, buddy. We're not in high school anymore. Sharon's John's wife and John carries a gun. And so does her father. Makes me real nervous."

"I don't remember askin' you to hold my pants."

"Tag, Sharon's ancient history. There's plenty of women in this world besides Sharon McKinnie Long."

He smiled that disarming, childlike smile that always looked so out of place on his hawk-lean face. "Not for me."

"So what happens if Sharon doesn't get the urge to stop in and see Miss Johnson one night?"

"That's your game, pal, not mine. You're the heavy thinker. All I know is, I'm not alone anymore."

"I'd rather be lonely than dead."

"You ain't me an' this conversation is over." He wasn't angry. He was just through talking about Sharon.

"Okay, okay. Forget it," I snapped. He was smiling at me as he waited for me to cool off. He knew me well.

"I'd have stayed out of it if I hadn't seen that car," I said.

"I know," he said, nodding. "Probably nothin'." He put the plug into the thermos and I handed him my cup. "Long as you're givin' me advice, let me give you some."

"Sure."

"Remember how happy you were when we got out? Every day was gravy from here on out, you said. Check yourself out, man. You used to be laid-back. You used to know what havin' a single day, any day, meant. Now you're wired tighter than those D.I.s at Camp Pendleton. This thing with the owls or whatever it is, you better deal with it. Life's too short. You ought to know that."

"Easy to say. I was lucky to get on with the Department in the first place. The Bitterroot isn't exactly job rich. I line up with my gut feelings and who'll feed my family?"

"Bein' around you these days they probably don't have much of an appetite anyway." We both laughed.

Tag stood, put his hands on his hips, looked out over the sunlit valley, and slowly drew in a lungful of sharp mountain air. "Man,

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if this ain't heaven, you sure as hell can see it from here."

"Uh huh, and we'll be able to see it that much better as soon as you get the rest of these damn trees out of the way."

Tag laughed out loud. "Go tell lies to the Council, will ya. I got work to do."

Early the next morning I was having steak and eggs at Ed's Kitchen trying to forget the verbal abuse I'd taken at Elk Lake the night before. Doc Redmond and I got along in the everyday but at meetings we really squared off. He just wouldn't buy the "sustainable yield" argument the industry and the Department used to explain more cutting.

Doc had gotten a big hand from the tree huggers for his parting shot: "Hey Cal, just how far are you willing to drive to see a tree that's older than you are? You guys are worse than any forest fire we ever had around here."

Ed came around the counter and sat on the stool next to mine. He was a retired truck driver who ran this little restaurant just to have people to talk to. He was shaking his head.

"I just can't get over Tag," he said. "It still hasn't sunk in. Had to have been some urban cowboy. No one around here hunts that stupid."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Cal, God, I'm sorry. I thought you musta heard by now. Tag was shot dead yesterday afternoon sometime. No one knows exactly when. Hunting accident and . . ."

Ed's lips were still moving but I couldn't hear him anymore. Tag and I had talked a lot about death in Panama. We'd talked it through. Where we wanted to be buried. What cock-and-bull story would give our folks the most comfort, that sort of thing. All that talk as we watched each other's back, and now here it was. A Tuesday morning in Ed's diner.

I had prepared well for losing him. That preparation had never left. Now it slipped out and over my heart like dusty armor. Ed's talking gradually broke through to me.

"Lucky he was found at all. Might have laid there all winter if we'd got an early snow."

"What happened?"

"Nobody knows very much. You know how most hunting accidents are. You just find the guy laying in the woods shot. I'm sorry, Cal. I know you guys were tight."

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"Who found him?"

"Sheriff McKinnie, after someone called it in."

"Where'd they take him?"

"He's in the basement of the church until the ambulance from Cross City comes to get him."

"Do me a favor, Ed. Call the Department and tell them I won't be working today."

I walked through the chilly morning sunshine over to the church and went down the back stairs into the basement meeting room that doubled as a game room. It was dark. The reverend was off somewhere, maybe to visit Tag's family. I took a breath and switched on the fluorescent lights. They had him up on the sturdy homemade Ping-Pong table. He was covered with a sheet and strapped tightly onto a stretcher. The familiar mummy shape could have been anybody.

I unbuckled the straps and drew off the sheet. Tag's naked, nut-brown body was straight out and natural-looking. There was a small hole below his left ribs.

It was a ridiculously gentle scene. Tag and I had been together where death arrived in deafening explosions that halved and quartered bodies. Tag looked so clean and quiet and peaceful. We would have shared a glance if it had been someone else lying there.

Tag's eyes were open. The same big lovely blue. I slid my fingers into his thick black hair, gleaming and rich even in death. He was my best friend, a solitary, oddly purposeful soul who understood his place in the world and accepted it. No one would ever know him or remember him like I would.

I slipped my fingers from his hair and as I did I saw the shadow of a bruise just below the hairline of his left temple. I ran my fingers back and forth and could feel swelling all along the side of his head. He had taken a hard hit there. Probably when he fell, but it seemed an odd location.

I took a closer look at the entry wound. There was a pink halo around it. Someone had scrubbed, but you could still see traces of powder. Powder burns from a hunting accident? Through outdoor clothes? I tensed. Tag had been shot naked. I glanced around. No clothes. No clothes with a bullet hole and blood. Maybe they figured because they controlled things no one would ask.

I quickly shoved my hand under the small of his back, feeling for the exit wound. There wasn't any. A hunting rifle would have torn

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a hole the size of a quarter out the other side, especially rifles from around here, where folks'd use bazookas if they could.

My legs were suddenly weak. I leaned heavily on the Ping-Pong table. John, Tag, and I had once been as close as you get. I didn't want to believe it could have come to this. But I had to know. I had to be sure. Only the bullet would tell the story.

I went to the end of the room and wetted some towels in the sink. I took out my pocketknife and opened it, wiping the blade clean. I snapped the knife shut and held it tightly in my fist. Forget the whole thing. He's dead. Drop it. Think.

I thought about what Tag would do if the situation were reversed. And then I knew I had to do it.

I touched the point of the blade to the edge of the wound and an image flashed up to my brain as if there was just enough living electricity left in his body to send one last message. I could see him walking toward me through a stand of head-high aspen saplings. He was happy, smiling. It struck me then just how much I would miss him. We had been together every step of the way.

I shook my head to clear the image. I tried to imagine I was dressing out a deer. I crosscut the entry wound to make room for my fingers. I probed for a few moments in the cold blood below his tightly muscled stomach, and then felt the slug partially embedded near his spine. I dislodged it with the tip of my knife. It was a small, plain lead slug, about 110 grains. A pistol bullet. A cop bullet. Not one of the heavy, jacketed slugs used on big game. You don't bring down an elk or a muley with a .38.

I cleaned Tag up and wiped everything down. I put the bullet in my pocket. I pulled the sheet gently to his neck, no farther. I closed his eyes for him. I did not strap him in; I tucked the sheet around him.

My vision was blurring. My emotions were surging through me on different levels, sometimes colliding. I tried to get a grip. I steadied myself and visualized the scene.

Tag and Sharon together, absorbed in one another, oblivious to the opening door. Then John, yelling, waving his .38, blood-gorged face pulsing. Tag tries to get away from Sharon, to clear her from the line of fire, or maybe he shields her. Then John steps quickly forward and blows a hole in Tag's belly. The bedroom rocks with the explosion. Sharon screams. Tag falls, bleeding to death as John watches and yells at him and gives him a kick in the temple. Later, John and Ernie cook up a story, for it would take them both to pull

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it off. Sharon would go along. What else could she do?

I turned the lights off. Through the sheet I held one of Tag's hands in both of my own and stood in the quiet darkness.

I left the church and went out to my truck and got my revolver.

They were sitting in the small sheriff's office down the street, just the two of them, Ernie behind the desk and John in a chair off to the side. Their uniforms were in bad shape and they both needed shaves. Ernie was struggling to find something to say. I went over to the coffeepot and filled a styrofoam cup. I leaned against the wall next to John's chair.

"Feel like I lost one of the family," Ernie finally said in his emphysemic wheeze. He smoked heavily and had a good belly on him. In his day he'd been as hard as they come. "I always think of you three as my own," he said. "You know, havin' no boys myself. Got real used to seein' you three little bums runnin' wild in my town."

"Tag always thought highly of you Ernie, you know that," I said. "What happened?"

"Not much to tell. Got a call about a pile of poached elk carcasses and went to check it out. Found Tag. Whoever called, that's what they wanted. Weren't no carcasses. Somebody took a sound shot or a running shot, prob'ly, hit Tag and felt bad about leavin' him out there. I figure whoever done it's long gone. Don't make no difference nohow, Tag'll be just as dead if someone says they done it."

"Little late for huntin' lessons," I said.

"That's the way I see it."

I poked John's boot with my own. "How you holdin' up, partner?"

For the first time John looked directly at me, searching, trying to read me. "I been better. Pretty rough bringing him in. In the wrong place at the wrong time, I guess." John was a big man, not as tall as Tag but heavier by fifty pounds. He always gave me the impression that he thought being big was a major accomplishment in itself, and that he wasn't required to do much more in this life except be big.

"How *you* doin'?" Ernie asked. "You and Tag was thicker'n thieves." His tone was genuinely paternal.

"Well, I don't think it's hit me yet. I just keep remembering so much, you know? Things keep going through my mind." I began to reminisce about Tag, and as I spoke I could see both men visibly loosen up. They settled deeper into their chairs. They wouldn't have

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been sure until now what Tag might have said to me about Sharon or what I might suspect.

Pretty soon I had them smiling, and we were all trading Tag stories. John's were about times before we'd left for the corps; there weren't any times after. Tag and I both kept a definite fondness for Ernie, though. Small-town sheriffs and hell-raising kids have a way of getting to know each other. More than once Ernie had let us off when his deputies wanted to hang us for our stupid stunts.

"Yeah, one thing about ol' Tag, he sure had a way with women," I chuckled. "Never saw a man so single-minded about it. An' whatever it was he was sellin', they sure were buyin'."

If I'd pulled the pin out of a live grenade the mood in the room couldn't have changed more. John shifted in his chair, straightened up a bit, and Ernie looked at him worriedly, fumbling for a cigarette.

Ernie started talking fast: "Remember that time I caught you three takin' returnables out of the back of Bostitch's store? I—"

"You know, I remember one time in San Miguelito I was talking to this girl and all of a sudden she gets this big smile, an' in her broken English she starts telling me about how wonderful ol' Tag is, and I mean in real explicit language. She said that once the girls in the business got to know Tag, they'd almost fight to see who'd get to be with him. He was really something with those women down there, a legend, almost."

As if commanded by a voice only he could hear, John stood abruptly and walked, almost marched, over to the coffeepot.

Ernie began shuffling papers on his desk like all of a sudden he had work to do.

"Did Tag tell you guys who he was seeing around here lately?" I waited for a moment as if I thought they might actually reply. "Whoever she was, man, she was head over heels for him. He told me a few things, enough for me to know that she was really sick of her old man. Nobody home, if you know what I mean. He say anything to you guys? . . . John, he say anything to you?"

John Long turned from the coffeepot to face me. He put down the mug he had just filled. His thick arms hung loose at his sides. "Well, I guess he wouldn't have, would he, Cal." It wasn't a question. "You know Tag and I never talked much anymore. Or you an' me, either, for that matter."

Ernie came quickly around his desk, then stopped awkwardly and sat on the edge as if that was what he'd intended.

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"Whoever that woman was, she was married, if you could call it that. Couldn't have been much of a marriage. We should find out who that woman was so we can tell her where Tag's buried. I expect she'll want to put flowers on his grave every day. Don't you think that's likely, John? Don't you think that woman will dream of Tag at night while she's lying next to her wimp husband? Don't you think that when he touches her it will be Tag she's—"

John was quicker than I expected but I had chosen my spot carefully and had positioned my body just the way I wanted. All my weight went into a side kick that pushed his whole leg almost horizontal to the floor. He hung for a second in mid-punch, then crashed down hard. I was straddling him with my gun in his shocked face before he knew what had happened. He reached weakly for his gun, but I stood on his arm and shoved my short barrel into an eye.

"You'd be easy to kill. You'd be nothin' to kill after what Tag and I've done."

Ernie was way too slow and now could only grip the desk with both hands, afraid anything he did would trigger the shot.

"Jesus, Cal, don't do it, boy, don't do it. That's Johnnie, Cal."

"Yeah, it's Johnnie all right. This chicken-livered son of a bitch isn't good enough to shine Tag's shoes." I cocked the hammer slowly, so he could hear it.

"Easy, Cal, easy," Ernie said low and tense. Ernie had found himself. "Use your brain. Tag ain't comin' back no matter what you do. Cal, you're just makin' this mess worse."

I raised my gun to cover the room. "You don't tell me squat, old man. I've got something in my pocket that will hang you both. Here, John, this is from Tag." I kicked him as hard as I could in the temple. His eyes rolled and showed white. I didn't stay to see if the kick had killed him.

I found myself at Mission Bluff seeking silence. Mission Bluff sits above the large backwater of a dam. You have to park below and take a trail up. Then you can look out over the peaceful waters to the mountains beyond and make them do anything for you. They will grieve with you or slumber with you or watch over you or be happy for you, whatever you want from them, they will give.

I didn't know Ernie had found me until I heard his raspy voice. "You sorry bastard." His gun was out. I'd forgotten how much bigger they looked when you were the target. He stared at me, his face bloodless and deeply creased.

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"You had us both fooled. Didn't figure you knew anything," he said. He watched me. With his free hand he dug for a cigarette in his front pocket and lit up with a snap of his Zippo, his big revolver hanging at his side all the while.

"Shoulda seen it comin'," he said. "Seen so many of these God-damn domestics. Guess I expected more out of all of you. Hell, I practically raised you. We were all friends."

"Friends! You're no friends of mine, and you sure as hell were no friends of Tag's."

"You're wrong," he said tiredly. "But I forgot, you knew everything, didn't you? Didn't have to talk it over. You were so sure of yourself you could kill Johnnie."

"John's dead?" I felt a flicker of triumph, then a sense of falling.

"Yeah, but not from the kick. Your little speech finished him off. He never got up from the floor. Put the barrel in his mouth and . . ." He shuddered. "Hope to God there's no memories in heaven."

"I won't let you take me in. You stopped being Sheriff when you helped John cover this thing up."

"That so?" He gave me a disgusted look. "Your idea of friendship runs mighty thin, you know that? I used to take the three of you fishin' right down there, you, Tag, and Johnnie." He waved his gun toward the distant bank below.

"No, I'm not here to take you in. Fact is, I already covered for you. I told everyone John killed Tag because of Sharon and then couldn't live with it. Gash from your boot I said he got from hittin' the floor."

"Ernie, I—"

"Shut up, Cal. You shoulda done your talkin' when Johnnie was still alive." He started to say something sharper but stopped himself. He looked old, ready to drop.

"You had it exactly backwards," he said after a while. "It was Tag and Sharon and John, all right, but John didn't kill Tag. Sharon did. John caught'm together. Tag and John started at it and it might have ended right there with just a good fight but Tag knocked John down and then grabbed a lamp . . . Lamp's damn heavy, brass. He was going to nail John with it. John had tossed his gun aside, afraid he'd use it. Sharon grabbed it. That was that. Happened in a heartbeat. Domestics always do. Only this time it was my family. Jesus . . ." He pulled deep on his cigarette and exhaled a long stream.

"So what were we supposed to do? Me and John arrest her? Me arrest her and John? Would that do anybody any good? Tag was

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gonna kill John, I'm sure of it. But who knows what the prosecutor would make of it? So we come up with the hunting accident. Woulda worked, too. All we had left to do was put a .30-06 round through the wound. The medical examiner at Cross City would never know the difference. We'd already decided that if you suspected anything, we'd level with you. We figured you'd understand. Bein' as how we was all friends.

"But you didn't bother to ask us straight out, did you? No, you blindsided Johnnie like he was some loser who didn't mean anything to anybody.

"I ain't arrestin' you Cal. Can't, not without making this mess worse all around. But you're leavin'. I want you outta the Bitterroot."

"Wait Ernie, I—"

"Wait!" he shouted. "You're askin' me to wait after what you done? Johnnie Long was a damn good man. *He tossed his Goddamn gun aside, for Chrissake.* Wait my ass. You're leavin'."

"You can't just chase me out of my own home."

"No? Do you think because I'm sixty and a sheriff I'm immune to this domestic stuff? You made my daughter a widow. Every time my little granddaughters ask about their daddy, I'll think of your sorry ass. And I'll keep thinking about you until one mornin' you wake up dead. That's how it is."

He leveled the revolver at me. His hands had been shaky but now the gun was steady. As I looked into his hard eyes I knew the valley of my youth was gone forever. Whatever my future was, it wasn't here.

"You cut the bullet out of him, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"Toss it here and git."

I took the bullet from my pocket. I walked to Ernie. He cocked his revolver as I approached. The barrel of his gun nosed my chest.

"Hell, Ernie," I said quietly. "You just might be the answer to my prayers." I gave him the bullet. With slow movements he holstered his gun.

"Wind's coming up. Got a touch of winter in it," he said. "This year's almost gone. When the new one gets here, I want you somewheres else."

He looked away from me like I was a Bitterroot pine already cut, loaded, and hauled from memory. I turned and headed down the path toward my truck. ●

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The creation for which David Delman is best known is Jacob Horowitz, a cop who, like the author, grew up in the Bronx in a tightly-knit Jewish family. The police force continues to exercise Mr. Delman's imagination in this new piece, though Slow Joe is cast in a very different mold from Horowitz . . .

SLOW JOE

by DAVID DELMAN

They started calling Joe Pagano "Slow Joe" when he was in the fifth grade at Fricksburg Elementary. By his coevals of the schoolyard, he was reckoned slow-witted as well as slow of foot, a combination of some importance since it meant he could be harassed with impunity despite his size. Even if taunting *should* happen to ignite a basically bovine temperament, he'd be easy to elude, they felt.

Joe himself could recall the nickname's nativity. The specific incident centered on a demon of a boy named Harry Lenchner who on this day had capped twenty minutes of verbal abuse with a nasty trip-and-shove from ambush. Overconfident, he had then victory-danced around his victim almost too long. Joe's large hand had been inches from actual contact when Lenchner's instinct for survival kicked in. A convulsive leap gained him freedom. Joe got to his feet and lumbered after him, but it took only seconds for the gap between them to widen hopelessly.

"Slow down, Joe," a merciless voice, a girl's, had called out mockingly. Almost instantly an extemporaneous chorus blended in the "Slow Joe" chant he was to hear often before leaving that institution of lower learning behind.

But there were, he knew, at least two more ways to explain the nickname's staying power. These were embodied in his sister and brother, the quick Paganos: Maria, two years older than Joe, and Ralph, seven years older.

Above-average students and excellent athletes, they had set a Pagano standard as inescapable as a fact of life. Inevitably, like

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some laboratory specimen, Joe was measured against it. Through Fricksburg Elementary and later Fricksburg High, their achievements were kept ever green for him by a series of visibly disappointed teachers.

If he had followed them to the state university it would have been more of the same. But he did not.

Not that Maria or Ralph had ever been cruel to him. Far from it, they had been loving and unusually protective siblings—helping him with his studies, trying to lift his athletic skills to at least a socially acceptable level.

It was just that they were both so obviously competent, and he . . . he was Slow Joe. "Don't feel bad," he had once said to Maria in the midst of a fruitless effort to get him off his heels for more adventitious running, "I am what I am, I guess."

She crossed the cinder track to him, hugged him, and immediately began to cry.

It was his mother who was impatient with Joe.

"I don't know where you came from," Catherine said to him often, though anyone who had ever set eyes on Joe's blond giant of a father would not have regarded that as much of a mystery. "You're not like any child I ever expected to have. Look at you—a hulk. Napolitanos should not be hulks. North of Italy peasants can be hulks if they want to. *My* young should be slim and lithe. And quick, quick."

With a disapproving shake of the dark, elegant head that had been so faithfully reproduced in her two older children, she would sigh and wrap herself comfortingly in her matriarch's shawl—which happened to be nonexistent, or at least invisible.

Early on, Joe had believed that his mother's quandry was caused by the fact that his father had been dead so long. Corporal Peter Pagano of the Fricksburg Police Department had been gunned down by a bank robber he believed he had killed. He had fired three bullets into the man's chest at fairly close range and watched him begin to collapse. Having then turned his attention to the robber's partner, he never saw the reactive, possibly unintended, certainly unaimed shot squeezed off. The bullet had lodged in the back of his skull. He was twenty-eight years old at the time. Joe was one.

Sam DeKoven, president of First Federal, declared the slain officer a hero and had installed a brass plaque on the bank floor to mark the spot where Peter's head had come to rest: "Police Officer Peter Pagano," it read, "the bravest of the brave, died here in performance of his duty. Lest we forget."

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Catherine, on the other hand, had been furious. "A million Paganos have been cops and none of them ever did anything but keep his mouth shut, his nose clean, and get promoted. *My* Pagano has to be a hero."

Then, from under her invisible shawl, she screamed, "Hateful, stupid man, you were always . . ." It was a description Joe had yet to hear her complete.

On the day he graduated from Fricksburg High (much nearer the bottom of his class than the top), Joe was six feet five inches tall and weighed 200 pounds. There was now a noticeable bulge around his middle, the predictable result of a pasta-packed diet viewed by Catherine as vital to health and well-being.

"Paganos do *not* get fat from pasta," she announced, as if Joe's performance were an act of perversity.

On the plus side, Joe had regular, well-cut features, lighted occasionally—during unselfconscious moments—by an infectious smile. His eyes were a remarkable shade of light blue—his dad's eyes, he'd been told. Young women should have found him good-looking, but they did not. They found him kind, gentle, terrible at small talk, and a trial to be with.

On graduation day plus one, he had the following conversation with his mother.

"What will you do now, my son?" she asked, launching it. Catherine Pagano was fifty then, a very attractive, well-turned-out, highly contemporary fifty, but she'd had a maternal grandmother who impressed her greatly and whose speech patterns she adopted from time to time because she thought they lent authority. Catherine was a woman ever alert to an edge.

As for the question itself, she regarded it as bordering on the rhetorical, but she asked it anyway—for form's sake and because she didn't wish to *appear* dictatorial.

They were in the trophy den where most serious Pagano conversations took place. It was in the basement of the sprawling eight-room house on Mercer Street, in which Catherine had been born—the cherished only daughter of comfortably fixed, third-generation Italian-American parents. On Peter's death they had moved out, deeding the house to their daughter.

The trophy den, glittering with prizes earned by Ralph and Maria, also featured a beautifully made Jacobean table that Catherine enjoyed sitting behind—on a thronelike leather wing chair. This added three inches to her height, a circumstance of which she was certainly

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conscious. Not that she need be really concerned about edges in dealing with poor Joe; still, why take chances.

She found a tissue in the pocket of her gardening jeans, moistened it, and beckoned him toward her so that she could wipe away a small smudge of something on his forehead. "And so? What's to become of you, my Joe?"

"I don't know," he said.

She smiled. "I know you, Joey, my dreamer. It's like the old joke. A shepherd, that's your optimum choice of professions. Only there's not much call for them these days." She poked him playfully. "A shepherd, Joey?"

"No."

"Then what? Come on, you must have thought about it a little."

The words came fast, surprising him. "I could be a farmer. Uncle Sal's got two hundred and fifteen acres, a good half of them level. He plants alfalfa one year and field corn the next, and, yes, he's got sheep, too—on the north pasture. And when I worked there last summer he said I had the *feel*. He asked me—"

An incredibly long speech for Joe, and for a moment Catherine had been taken aback by it, but now she put up her hand and stopped the flow.

"To what? Go and live with him in Schenectady? Do you know how many feet it snows there in the winter?"

As a matter of fact Joe did, but he kept back the information.

"The *feel*," she said mockingly. "The feel indeed. What kind of nonsense? You're a city boy, Joey. Born and bred. Cars, traffic, people. Not birds, dumb-cluck chickens, and stupid sheep. Since when does a fat, bow-legged peasant like Salvatore Capparelli know more about my own son than I do?"

"He just—"

"It's a dream, a Joey-dream, a foolish fantasy. Your Uncle Sal is eighty years old. He's got phlebitis and the saints know what else. He could go tomorrow, and then what would happen to you? You think the son is as good-natured as the father?"

"Dominick's all right."

"Is he? Well, I don't happen to agree with you. What I think is he's got a mean streak. Give him half a chance, and he would happily make a slave out of you."

"Uncle Sal says for sixty thousand dollars I could be a partner, own a third of the farm. Dom says that's fine with him."

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She stared at him. "I don't like this, this talking behind my back. I don't like it at all."

He kept silent.

"Where would *you* get sixty thousand dollars?"

He kept silent.

"From me? Never. Never, never, never. Because I'm miserly? Because I begrudge it to you, Joe? Is that what you think?"

"No."

"Well, thank God for small favors. No. Because I won't help you spoil your life. I'm your mother. I know what's best for you. You'll join the police. Like your father and your father's father. The Paganos have always been police. Already, Ralph is a captain. In a year or so, no more than two, he'll be chief, you'll see. Is that so bad, to be a cop and have the chief for a brother?"

"No."

"Ralph loves you. He'll take good care of you, my Joe. He'll watch over you, protect you. And that's what you need."

He started to speak and then thought better of it.

"So it's settled?"

Something heavy inside Joe moved from his chest to his throat, but it was a feeling he was familiar with. He knew it could be managed. So he leaned forward to kiss Catherine's cheek when she asked him to while she smiled her approval. Actually, the conversation had gone much as both had expected.

For the next six years Joe Pagano performed his duties as a member of the Fricksburg P.D. without complaint.

And he was not by any means the worst cop on the force. Among his forty-four brothers and sisters in arms, few had cleaner records. He was honest and totally dependable. When ordered to be at a certain place at a certain time, he was there. Of course, if the situation changed, desk sergeants had better remember to call him in or he might remain longer than was expeditious. You could legitimately question his attention span.

But no one had ever questioned Joe's courage. There was the time he'd gone into a burning building to drag a child to safety. There was the even more spectacular time he'd disarmed an enraged wife who'd been screaming about how deeply she was planning to sink a kitchen knife into the throat of her terrified husband.

"You don't mean that," Joe had informed her. Which, contrary to all appearances, turned out to be true. As he closed the ten-yard gap between them, she never took her eyes from Joe, nor did she stop

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screaming. But when he held his palm out she docilely placed the knife in it. Rescued, the husband had immediately fainted. On recovery, he became one of those who reserved for Joe the kind of special warmth allotted to those who end nightmares. As did his wife, for that matter. Among Fricksburgers there was a small but intense cabal who saw Joe as shining.

On the other hand, at a crime scene, Joe had once idly picked up a Smith & Wesson .38, smearing a vital set of fingerprints. For this he had been officially reprimanded. It had taken Ralph's most vigorous efforts to save him from suspension.

What with one thing and another, it wasn't until his fifth year on the force that Joe made corporal, his father's rank. This was late as careers went, but then no one had ever predicted the fast track for Joe.

"Slow but sure, that's the ticket," Catherine said. "High profile means stress; stress means ulcers. You don't want ulcers, do you, Joey? Of course not. We'll just take our time and wait patiently for the next logical step." She patted his new stripe. "What a fine, upstanding corporal you are, my Joe. Your father would be proud."

Joe was glad to hear it.

In the meantime, Ralph—tough, smart, and a natural politician—had indeed become chief, and one morning eighteen months after Joe's promotion, he was called into his brother's office to discuss "the next logical step." He found his sister there, too.

She kissed him, gave him a cup of coffee, and then took a seat next to him on the leather couch facing Ralph's handsome cherrywood desk.

Young though he was, Ralph seemed at home with command. There was nothing of the martinet about him, but people obeyed him readily enough. For one thing he had the great advantage of looking the part. In uniform that morning he was lean and trim as ever, while a recent marriage and impending fatherhood had conferred a useful increment of dignity. Joe was proud of his brother.

Proud of his sister, too. Having fought off a ferocious trophy-den attack, she had dropped out of law school and married ("Beneath her, beneath her," Catherine still complained) the struggling owner of a local service station by whom she had just had her second son. Joe thought she had never been more beautiful.

Glancing up from some papers, Ralph said, "Hal O'Grady wants to bump you to sergeant."

O'Grady was Joe's department head.

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Joe sipped his coffee but said nothing. He sensed there was more to come.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Ralph said and looked at Maria for corroboration.

"We think you'll be uncomfortable, Joe," she said. "You'll have to give orders to people. And . . . plan things. There'll be more paperwork than you like." She took his hands. "But we could be wrong. If we are, just say so, and Ralph will—"

"It's up to you, Joey," Ralph said, breaking in because he didn't want Maria overstating the case. Of course he'd get Joey his sergeancy if he *truly* wanted it, but there was no way that wouldn't be a mistake. "All I say is think carefully about it. Damn straight, it'd be nice having that extra stripe. I'm not saying it wouldn't be. It's just that people expect more of sergeants. I mean, you can't go smearing evidence at a crime scene if you're a three-striper."

"There'd be hell to pay," Joe said, smiling.

"And Captain O'Grady knows that, of course. The thing is, he's not your friend, Joe. He's not mine either. He was in line for this job, and he's hated my guts ever since the mayor passed him over. What he wants is for you to screw up and embarrass both of us."

Maria looked as if this made her want to cry. Joe was about to say something to her when there was a knock at the door. Ralph said, "Come in," and, as if on cue, O'Grady appeared.

He was redheaded and heavy-jawed, one of those deceptive men who bury slyness under brawn and thus seem less mean-spirited than they are.

"Sorry to bust in, but Dan Collins just called. Of Collins Real Estate and Insurance? He asked for Joe to go down there. Joe specifically."

He did not add—because he did not have to—that Dan Collins was a newly elected member of Fricksburg's city council.

"What for?"

"I'm not sure. He was nutsy, yelling like a banshee. And then hung up before I could get him to make sense. Ask Joe. It's a repeat performance." He paused. "Might be a threepeat or fourpeat by now," he added, tolerant, amused, the way people are by mascots or eccentrics.

Ralph turned to Joe questioningly.

"The cat," Joe said. "There's a neighborhood cat that has this way of getting into their offices and setting off the alarm system. Don't know how, but he does. Then he disappears into the file room. Mr.

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Collins thinks I'm the only one who can find him. Anyway he drives Mr. Collins crazy. The alarm does, too. It's pretty loud."

"Why doesn't he—never mind. Go on, Joe. We're through here anyway, aren't we? I mean we understand each other."

"Sure."

"Best go slow, right?"

"Yeah."

O'Grady didn't speak, but his smile at "slow" was an insult. Ralph stared hard at him.

The smile became more circumspect, but he had the last word. "I'll just go tell Collins Catman is on the way."

He shut the door behind him with spurious good manners.

"That man just kissed his career goodbye," Ralph said. "Joe, I don't want you worrying about him."

Joe looked surprised, as if what had gone on between Ralph and O'Grady had been inaudible to him. "Okay," he said mildly. He lifted Maria's chin. "Kiss the bambinos for me."

"He's the world's sweetest boy," she said when he was gone.

"Which is why it's up to us to protect him. He depends on us for that."

"I know," she said. But sometimes she wondered if all that protection was the best thing in the world for Joe, if it kept him from making choices, from ever developing self-reliance. She had a quick, shuddery vision of Joe, a cocooned septuagenarian with a baby's unlined face. But since she was never as sure of things as Ralph was, she let her breath out surreptitiously so that he wouldn't notice.

It was almost exactly a month later that Joe resigned from the Fricksburg P.D.

Around mid-morning he came into his brother's office and asked if the chief was busy. When Ralph said he was never too busy to make time for his kid brother, Joe came farther in and sat down opposite the handsome cherrywood desk. For a while he said nothing. Ralph studied him.

"What, what, what?" he asked good-humoredly.

Joe smiled. "Waiting for Maria. I asked her to come down. She'll be here soon."

And in the next moment she was—looking anxious.

"What is it, Joey? You sounded so—"

He patted her hand. "It's just I've got some news, and it seemed like a good idea to tell you both together." He reached into his pocket and seconds later his badge was on Ralph's desk.

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Ralph's hand went forward automatically but then came back fast, as if repulsed by certain magical properties in the shiny metal. "What's this?"

Asked existentially, but Joe answered literally. "My badge. And my gun," he said, producing that, too.

Maria looked at Ralph. "He's angry with us. Oh, I knew he would be."

"Angry about what?"

"About not being promoted, of course."

"Oh, for God's sake, we explained that to him and he understood."

"Well, I don't know about that," she said. "Sometimes with Joe . . ."

And for a moment they studied their brother as if he were an abstraction.

Joe broke the silence. "I've finally got the money," he said.

"What money?" Ralph asked.

"For Uncle Sal," Maria said suddenly. "That money, Joe?"

He nodded.

Ralph moistened his lips. "You've got sixty thousand dollars?"

"Plus a little."

They stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"I sold a piece of property," Joe said. "Out on Route 49. Some big company's going to build something on it." And all at once Joe became animated. "Made twenty thousand to put me over the top. And the funny thing is, I didn't want to buy that plot at first, but Mr. Collins talked me into it. And he was right as usual."

"As usual?" Maria managed to say.

Joe nodded.

"You've been doing this for a while?" Ralph asked.

Joe nodded.

"How long a while?"

"Two, three years. Ever since the first time the cat set off Mr. Collins's alarm."

"You've made sixty thousand dollars in two, three years?"

"Plus a little," Joe said.

All three were silent then. Ralph and Maria tried to consider the ramifications of what they had just heard. But they couldn't really. It was as if a major cataclysm had taken place off in the next county, the nature of which they were not yet able to identify though they were feeling aftershocks.

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One ramification finally did occur to Ralph. "Where did you get the money to buy your first plot?"

"Borrowed it. Ten thousand dollars. From the bank, First Federal."

It was in its way the stickout in a series of amazing things. "You got Sam DeKoven to part with ten thousand dollars?"

Joe nodded.

"Without collateral?"

Joe smiled in recognition of the banker's reputation for super tight-fistedness. "Wasn't so hard. Just kept reminding him how Pop died." He cleared his throat. "Lest we forget," he quoted.

Despite herself, Maria giggled.

He leaned over to kiss his sister's cheek. "The bambinos can come visit on holidays," he said.

"Yes."

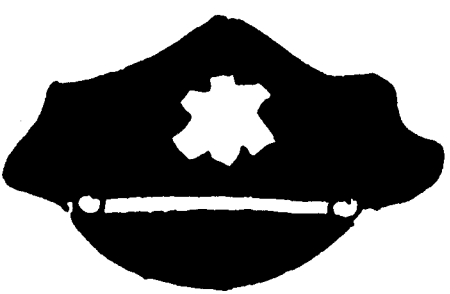
He then crossed the room to Ralph and kissed his cheek, too. "I really did hate being a cop."

For a moment Ralph struggled to find in himself the perspective-restoring words, that key phrase needed to salvage safety and sanity. But then he gave up, sighed, and simply said, "I know."

Joe grinned. The grin became wider and fuller. It was now a wider, fuller, brighter grin than either of his siblings had ever seen on him, had ever thought possible for him.

"I guess I better go tell Catherine," he said.

He left them, moving as swiftly as if the floor were waxed.



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a *NEW* Ganelon story by

JAMES POWELL

Somber as is this Christmas tale by James Powell, it is complete, in the tradition of good Christmas stories, with ghosts, snow, and carols. The author tells us that some aspects of the piece are based on incidents related in a history of the First World War . . .

HARPS OF GOLD

by JAMES POWELL

Late in the afternoon of December 24, 1916, the rain falling over the trenches of Flanders turned to a wet snow that clung to the barbed wire and lay on the ground for an instant as if reluctant to disappear into the stinking mud of the battlefield. Behind the lines the dense flurries were crowded with dark marching shapes and muttering voices.

Where two communication trenches converged, a pair of officers stood in the weather watching the army move forward. The younger of the two, Captain Ambrose Ganelon III, wore a kepi bearing the cabbage-and-rose insignia of the Principality of San Sebastiano and, beneath his trench coat, the sky-blue tunic and grenadine-colored trousers of the Tripolitanian Lancers. His face showed the abundant small scars and innumerable flat, shiny spots that mark the bare-knuckle boxer, one, the eyes suggested, who hadn't won a fight for a long time. After the three-day bombardment of Chastigny, Ganelon had been found crouched under a ruined field kitchen, chuckling thoughtfully to himself. And it was his eagerness to get back into action that convinced the doctors he had become slightly *dégommé,* or unstuck. He'd been reassigned to the Canadian First Division as liaison with the French forces on their right flank.

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The other officer with the narrow cane and red-tabbed lapels was Brigadier General Lester ("Whacko") Bridges, on a morale-boosting visit to the Canadian troops who were to lead the assault. Whacko Bridges was something of a legend among the Canadians, having seen combat at Ypres and St. Julien. The men liked the company of survivors.

Just as the snow began to fall, Ganelon and the general had managed to get themselves lost in the crisscross of communication trenches, abandoned saps, and old footpaths behind the lines as they were making the passage between Company C and Company D of the first brigade of the Sydenham Rifles, which was to be their final stop before the attack. The Sydenhams were a prison regiment, half the rank and file having obtained release from prison for agreeing to serve in the army.

The place where the two officers stopped to get their bearings had probably once been an orchard. But all the trees had fled, leaving stumps and shattered bits of wood to mark their places. Soldiers passed in the white gloom with their heads bowed under the burden of the weather. To Ganelon the new metal helmets gave them a coolie look.

When the general had his cigar going to his satisfaction, he continued what he'd been saying. "No, son, I'll tell you what this is all about. Last Christmas with the Germans and our boys out in no man's land playing football together and singing carols and exchanging presents scared the hell out of the brass. You can't run a war like that. So they dreamed this up. We won't gain an inch and there'll be heavy losses. But the survivors will be too bone weary to play football tomorrow." Bridges laughed. "And they call *me* crazy."

Ganelon hadn't been around the general long enough to hear anyone call him crazy. But he knew the man claimed to have been born with a lucky caul, which might account for his reputation for foolhardiness.

A soldier with a leather dispatch case and a young lieutenant carrying a full kit appeared out of the snow on their way, as luck would have it, to Company D. "I'll have you with the Sydenhams in three shakes of a dead lamb's tail, sirs," promised the dispatch runner.

The lieutenant's name was Sutton. He had a short fair moustache that looked as if it had only been started in officers' training school and bright blue eyes. "You a new man out, Lieutenant?" asked the general as they hurried on through the mud.

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"No, sir. I transferred from the RCR. I was with them at Mont Sorrel."

The general grunted and gave Ganelon a glance from under his heavy eyebrows. Ganelon knew an officer wouldn't leave a fashionable unit like the Royal Canadian Regiment for the Sydenhams unless he hadn't been given much choice. He wondered how the young officer had disgraced himself.

Sutton looked up at the snow. "The men say the Germans have some machine that makes the weather."

"Then they bungled it today," the general assured him heartily, "keeping their own spotter airplanes on the ground. We may surprise them yet." Bridges had been less optimistic earlier that afternoon. "God, I'm sick of beating the drum for this madness," he had told Ganelon. "But if the men have to do it, it's better they do it with a will. A month ago the Frenchies sent a regiment to the attack bleating like sheep. We don't need anything like that."

"You related to the Chatham Suttons, Lieutenant?" asked the general. "I knew Albert whose brother shot himself after the Petrolia Gas and Oil scandal." Before Sutton could answer, a jingle of harness announced two horses and a transport sergeant coming back from delivering hot rations to the front line. Ganelon saw the general stare and go pale. When the man and horses had passed Bridges whispered, "Did you see him, son, the fellow walking with the sergeant? It was Henderson. He winked. He gave me that 'come-on-in-the-water's-fine' look of his. It's the second time he's come to beckon me over since he got himself killed at Ovillers a year ago."

"I only saw the sergeant, sir," replied Ganelon uneasily.

Bridges smiled. "No, he won't leave me alone. Ghosts love haunting battlefields. Why not? They're out of the filthy business."

When they reached Company D the dispatch runner and Sutton went off looking for Captain Herbert, the company commander. The front line was as sloppy as a run-off ditch, a deep, narrow thing of weathered sandbags crowded with scaling ladders and soldiers in full packs brought up from the reserve trenches for the initial assault. The sergeants were expecting the general's visit. They roused the off-duty men of Company D from their ingenious dugouts and lean-tos of canvas, corrugated metal, and old doors built under the trench parapet. Bridges spoke briefly on the upcoming engagement with the help of an oilcloth map which Ganelon produced from a trench-coat pocket. Bridges indicated specific objectives with a slap of the crook of his cane, adding a "Whacko!" to each blow. Then he

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gave them his pitch about the advantage in fighting a war on the attack. Nine chances out of ten, he told them, trench wounds were to the head and fatal. What any sensible soldier wanted was a nice clean arm or leg wound to put him in hospital, or better yet on a ship back home. And those he'd only find out of the trenches and advancing on the enemy. The men smiled at the general wistfully as if they'd like to believe him and cheered at the end when he ordered them a double ration of rum before tonight's action.

Then it was "stand-to." Twice a day at dawn and dusk, the hours when an enemy attack was most likely, the men on the front line on either side of no man's land mounted the firing step and waited in readiness.

Bridges and Ganelon headed for company headquarters, a dugout built into the side of a trench connecting the support line and the front line. The general pulled back the gas blanket over the entrance and waved his aide through. At the bottom of fifteen steep steps Ganelon found the familiar dim, low-ceilinged, twelve-by-twelve-foot room, bunk beds with chicken wire for springs and empty sandbags for mattresses along the far wall, in one corner a broken-down easy chair, next to it a portable phonograph on a stack of munitions boxes, and next to that a small, potbellied coal stove that vented out the dugout door. A tinsel Christmas star hung from the ceiling beam in the middle of the room and beneath it on a small, roughly made table was a bottle of whiskey, glasses, a black-handled bowie knife, and a candle on a small tin lid. General Bridges lit the candle and smiled at the bottle appreciatively. "A good host, Captain Herbert," he said, pouring them both a drink. "Though a terror if put into a temper, I'm told. Happy to have him on our side."

The general sat down at an upturned box at the table and fell silent. Respecting his superior's quiet mood, Ganelon leaned back against the wall and stared at the tinsel star. It sent his thoughts above ground. Ganelon imagined stand-to on this of all nights, two lines of armed men facing each other across a graveyard of landscape and barbed wire that stretched from the Channel to Switzerland. And they would stay there watching until utter nightfall made attack unlikely. Then the Sydenhams would send out work details to cut their own wire and open the way for the bloody work ahead. But Ganelon felt strangely abstracted from everything. Being a general's aide was a lot like Bridges's friend Henderson on his Cook's tour of hell. Ganelon was here but out of it. Tonight he would sleep

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in a warm bed back at Division. He finished his drink and poured another.

After a long while Captain Herbert and Sutton arrived fresh from stand-down, bringing the evening chill in on their trench coats. Herbert was a stocky, florid-faced, middle-aged man with hard, quick eyes and a blunt manner which, combined with the temper of which Bridges spoke, may have accounted for why he was only a captain. "Glad you didn't wait for us, General," he said, pouring whiskey in a glass and passing it to the young lieutenant. "Brought Sutton here back for a welcome drink."

"Quite so," said Bridges. "Do you know Captain Ganelon, my aide?"

"The famous detective-agency family," said Herbert, shaking Ganelon's hand. " 'We never sleep,' right, Captain?"

Ganelon corrected him. "That's Mr. Pinkerton."

But Captain Herbert had moved on to more important things. "Sutton here says they tried a night attack at Festubert," he told the general in a worried voice.

"The Germans got their flares up before we were through the wire, sir," said Sutton. "The ones that come down slow on parachutes."

"Well, the poohbahs back at Division expect this time we'll catch them dreaming of Christmas in Hunland and all that sort of hee-haw," said the general with a short, grim laugh. Then he frowned and asked Herbert earnestly, "Didn't you serve with Captain Wales?"

"He saved my life once and my bacon more times than that," said Herbert, adding, "Things happen when they leave a man in the trenches too long. I hear they moved his court-martial back to tomorrow. I've sent for Poynter."

The general asked, "Poynter? The witness? Is he still here?"

"Not for long," said Herbert. "Goes back to Division tonight. Too damned precious to die in battle."

Ganelon saw the general grow thoughtful at this news.

Then Lieutenant Sutton said, "Excuse me, sir. Will I have time to write something home?"

"Go ahead," said Herbert. "We'd best keep out of the way for a while. The men get the jitters with officers fussing about. I've got a letter, too. Somewhere." Herbert slapped his pockets, found an envelope, and dropped it on the table. "Maybe the general will take them back with him."

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Sutton moved the candle to the corner of the table next to the nearest lower bunk where he sat, chewing on a pencil and concentrating on his letter.

"Beautiful woman, Wales's mother," remarked the general. "Old Henderson lost his heart to her completely. I'd hoped Wales would get off with broken to the ranks. But there's talk of a firing squad."

"God!" exclaimed Herbert, slamming his fist on the table. "I should've broke Poynter's filthy little neck when I had the chance!"

Ganelon knew Captain Wales's story. He'd married on leave in England. Soon there were stories about his wife and another man. One night Wales's raiding party had come back without him, the men reporting they'd become separated from him in the dark and then heard shots. Wales was arrested at Calais trying to cross to England using the leave papers of an officer killed in the shelling two days before. Poynter bore the captain a grudge. He saw him going through the dead man's things and, when Wales went missing, put two and two together and tipped off the military police. Division looked on the robbing of the corpse of a fellow officer as a crime as terrible as desertion in the face of the enemy. Poynter's testimony was expected to blacken Wales's character enough to warrant the death penalty.

Artillery shells fell nearby. Then the barrage moved closer, making the gas blanket belly in.

Touching the knife thoughtfully, the general asked, "Where'd you find the pig-sticker?"

"Took it from a German raiding party last night," said the captain, passing him the whiskey. "Ugly thing, eh? A blackjack or a leaded stick isn't good enough for them anymore. I figured Division would want a look."

The general smiled. "No, they'd only cut themselves." Bridges handed the bottle to Sutton. The lieutenant, who was sharpening his pencil with a pocket knife, passed it on to Ganelon without pouring himself a drink or losing his thoughtful expression. As Ganelon tilted the bottle he smiled to himself, imagining Sutton and the girl he was writing to walking together through Maria Chapdelaine country.

Three more shells hit nearby. A moment later a large corporal and a small private ducked into the dugout, hurried down the steps, and came to attention in front of the captain. "You're a lucky devil, Poynter," Herbert told the clerkish-looking private. "You get to miss the show. You too, Corporal. You get to escort him back to Division."

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The eyes behind Poynter's steel-rimmed glasses told Ganelon that this was disturbing news. The man was clearly not the corporal's favorite person. And he knew it.

"I hear you had trouble finding us, General," said Herbert. "The corporal here can show you the way back."

"I've come this far, I might as well go along on your little stroll in the country tonight," replied the general.

"Sir . . . ," protested Herbert.

"General . . . ," said Ganelon.

Bridges shook his head at his aide. "It's back to Division for you, son. That's an order. You're still dragging your wing. I brought you along to remind you how bad things can get up here. Don't rush the mending. And you, Captain Herbert, can rest easy." The general took out a letter. "I couldn't tell the people at Division what I meant to do. They've been winning too much of my money at cards to let me go. This'll put them in the picture." He added his letter to Herbert's. "The way I see it, either the people running this war are crazy or I am. If I'm killed I'll be dead right. If I make it to the enemy wire alive then I'm a raving lunatic. And if I'm captured, well, the Germans will have a crazy general on their hands."

Here Lieutenant Sutton gave a quiet curse. He was bleeding from the nose, spattering blood down the front of his trench coat. "It's nothing," he insisted, trying to stem the flow with a khaki handkerchief. "I get them now and then since Festubert. It'll pass."

A pair of legs appeared on the steps. A voice said, "Our wire cutters are back in the trench, Captain." The legs disappeared. Herbert swallowed his drink and stood up. As he did, there was a sudden artillery barrage that seemed to come down in the direction of the front line. The dugout shook and the dust fell. The general muttered, "The bastards are early and they're firing short."

"Those are German guns," said the captain. "Either they're working on our troop concentrations or . . ."

". . . or great minds thinking alike, the Germans came up with the same filthy idea we did," agreed the general.

Suddenly a cluster of shells landed almost on top of the dugout. The candle fell to the floor. The darkness was palpable. Ganelon felt it leap around him. But at least it hid his fear. The bombardment continued, each long minute worse than the one before. The air smelled like a freshly dug grave. Just when Ganelon was sure the shells would never stop coming they slackened and seemed to move away. Now he heard other noises around him, the sound of leather

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and metal and low laughter which he suspected was his own. The smell turned to tobacco smoke on damp uniforms, cordite, and the ever present chloride of lime.

"Get the candle, somebody," ordered Captain Herbert.

"Got it," said the general. "It's the damn matches I can't find."

"Here they are, sir," said Sutton. A match flared and the young lieutenant, who was still on his knees on the floor, lit the candle.

"Good God!"

Ganelon followed the general's astonished eyes to Poynter's bloody body sitting on the bottom step with his legs spread out in front of him and the hilt of the bowie knife protruding from his throat. The corporal knelt down by the body, turned quickly, and said, "He's dead." He held up his bloody hands as proof of his words.

Remarking to himself that those hands had been bloody before the corporal knelt down, Ganelon took the man's place beside the body. A front pocket of the victim's uniform jacket had been torn loose and hung down like a flap on his chest. One trouser pocket was turned inside out while the other was not, suggesting a hurried look for something which had been found. "Somebody came a very long way to murder," observed Ganelon over his shoulder.

"Hell, we all did," remarked Herbert in a hard, grim voice, adding, "Well, Captain, it looks like you get to practice the family trade. But we can't hang around to watch. We all have tonight's work to do. You know where to find me if you need me." Herbert looked at Sutton. "Lieutenant," he said.

Sutton scrawled a quick line to his letter home, sealed the envelope, added it to the others, and followed in Herbert's careful footsteps around the corpse and up the steps. At the gas blanket Herbert turned back and said, "Get back to your platoon, Corporal. You've gone and let your ticket out of this mess get himself killed."

The general put a farewell hand on Ganelon's shoulder and nodded at the corpse as though he was leaving his aide in good company. "Right up your alley, son," he said. "Good. It'll keep your mind off things. Henderson and I will be watching to see you figure out who done it." General Lester ("Whacko") Bridges stuck his cane under his arm and took the steps two at a time.

As the corporal moved to follow him, Ganelon said, "I know this wasn't your work, Corporal. You had a hundred better places to kill Poynter between here and Division."

"Yes, sir. Even with you along, I'd have found a way to get us separated in the dark. I'd have fixed him good."

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"But you did take something from his body."

"He kind of fell into my arms in the dark," said the corporal. "I knew he was dead. I only took back what wasn't his. You see, sir, we have this sweepstakes thing before a big push. Everyone pools their money. The survivors divvy it up afterwards. The dead don't care. The wounded figure they're well out of it. And besides, the medical orderlies would only rob them along the way. Anyway, before I could give the pool money to the padre to hold, Poynter stole it from my kit, figuring to get away with it because he was being sent back to Division for the court-martial. He didn't like me much. I served under Captain Wales, sir, and proud of it. I never let Poynter forget that. He wasn't very happy when I pulled escort duty."

"A thief, was that why he's with the Sydenhams?"

The corporal shook his head. "Shady bookkeeping, sir. Remember the Petrolia Oil and Gas business? That was Poynter. No, you wouldn't know about that. But it was pretty big in our part of the country. Hit a lot of our better people in the pocketbook. Speaking of that . . ." He handed Ganelon a leather coin purse. "I'd be obliged if you hold this for me, sir." Then the corporal was gone.

Ganelon sat back down at the table. He couldn't leave while there was still whiskey in the bottle. Besides, he had his family trade to practice. He poured himself a drink, looked over at the dead man, and considered asking the usual parlor-game questions. Who had the motive and the opportunity to murder Poynter? Motive? It was almost refreshing to see a man killed for a reason again.

From outside he heard the officers' whistles and knew the attack had begun. He imagined the men mounting the ladders and doubling up to move through the gaps in the wire. Now they were forming up into a loose line on the other side. He heard the distant tock-tock-tock of the German machine guns and knew the flares were up. So much for surprise! He heard his own voice telling the men to close up and maintain the distance. "Not so fast! Steady on the left! Easy! Easy! Keep the line straight!" Ganelon remembered what it was like to be standing on ground crawling with wounded.

With a terrible roar shells exploded all around the dugout. Ganelon crouched forward over his glass, and in his grab to save the bottle he knocked the candle to the floor again. The blackness around him bucked and heaved. To keep from going mad he focused his mind on the murder. As for motive, both the general and Herbert had reason enough to kill Poynter, the witness who could send Wales

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to the firing squad. And suppose the lieutenant was one of the Chatham Suttons, victims in the Petrolia Oil and Gas embezzlement? Suppose he'd had himself transferred here on purpose but arrived by one door just as his prey was about to leave by another? So all three had motive.

In his mind's eye Ganelon placed them where they'd been when the candle went out. Herbert, standing at the table, was closest to Poynter and could very easily have picked up the knife, taken two steps, and plunged it into the man's throat. The general, sitting at the other end of the table, was only two more paces away. And Lieutenant Sutton on the lower bunk was almost as close. All three could have killed Poynter ten times over before the candle was relit. But which one actually did?

Like a thunderstorm, the artillery barrage moved away as quickly as it came. Ganelon didn't bother to light the candle. He sat in darkness. After a while he heard the stumbling and curses as another wave in the attack moved up from the reserve trench. He didn't discover his hand was shaking until he raised the whiskey to his lips. Darkness covers a multitude of cowardices. Ganelon thought about that for a moment.

Suddenly he was down on his knees, feeling about on the floor for the candle. The man who stabbed Poynter in the dark knew he risked being spattered with blood. His guilt would have been apparent to everyone as soon as the candle was lit. Unless he bloodied himself beforehand.

Ganelon found the stump of wax and lit it. Sutton's letter was addressed to a Mrs. Curtis Sutton of Chatham, Ontario. He tore it open. The several pages inside were blank except for a single line. No, Sutton hadn't been writing his lady love. His mind had to focus completely on his spur-of-the-moment plan to kill Poynter. The single line he wrote in his letter read, "Mother, I have found the bastard and he is mine!"

Ganelon stood up, buttoned his trench coat, and set his kepi at the angle at which they are worn in the Tripolitanian Lancers. Stuffing the letters in his pocket, he moved past the murdered man and up the steps. The trench was crowded with troops standing in the wet snow waiting for their turn to go up to the front line. The stretcher-bearers had started crawling out in ones and twos to drag in the wounded who lay close to the parapet. Ganelon may have been ordered back to Division. Nobody said he couldn't bring a wounded man or two to the aid station on the way.

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He followed a stretcher-bearer through a hole in the wire. Thirty yards brought him to the place where the wounded groaned among the dead. A hand gripped Ganelon's arm. He grabbed the man under the armpits and dragged him toward the trench. Overhead, beyond the whispering of the machine-gun bullets, the sky was bursting with bright celebration. The falling snow might have been its gay debris. Ganelon made many trips out into the battlefield. Once during an intense barrage he took shelter in a shell hole, and when the next flare lit up the scene he found himself face-to-face with the body of a young officer with a moustache and a revolver who looked no more like a murderer than Sutton had. At last, muddy, exhausted, and with his arms and legs heavy with fatigue, Ganelon found a spot among the snowy human shapes on the firing step and fell into a deep sleep.

He didn't know how long he slept. He woke, cold and stiff, to an echoing silence. For a happy moment Ganelon was a boy again, nodding off during Mass in San Sebastiano's damp old cathedral. Then he was back there on the firing step, listening for the sound that had awakened him.

Someone lit a cigarette, and in that bright moment Ganelon saw that the men around him were awake and listening too. A man across the way said, "I thought you were dead, mate," and chattered on, bringing Ganelon up to date. The Sydenhams had taken the trenches opposite. But the Germans, having intended their own offensive that night, were able to counterattack in force. They drove the Canadians out, pursuing them back across the battlefield. Reinforcements allowed the Canadians to turn and stand their ground. After a bloody hand-to-hand, both sides had fallen back to the trenches they started from.

The man stopped to listen. Ganelon heard the sound too, and knew it was the one that had awakened him. Was it a congregation at prayer? Was it a choir of many voices singing a low, sad hymn? "What the hell's that?" he demanded.

"The wounded," said the talkative soldier. "Been coming and going like that for two hours."

Ganelon understood. From the blasted ground and barbed wire of no man's land, where the wounded lay the thickest, voices were crying out for help in English and German.

"They won't let us go fetch them in," said the soldier. Another said, "Got to save ourselves for the attack tomorrow." "The knockout blow," said a third bitterly. Someone else cursed and then an-

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other. Men were getting up onto the firing step to peer out toward the terrible sound.

Just then Ganelon heard something else, a strange noise of men and metal coming up the communication trench. But they weren't reinforcements. Ganelon strained to see through the darkness. Suddenly he heard a military band strike up a lively march from the German trenches. Now another on the left flank struck up a French march. At that same moment the Sydenham Rifles' regimental band appeared out of the snow. As Ganelon watched in bewilderment, the bandsmen halted, raised their instruments, and began to play. He moved closer, doubting his eyes and ears. Was it some kind of damn band competition? Here? Then the answer came to him. Great minds were still thinking alike. The powers-that-be on both sides were afraid a night listening to the wounded would leave the men unfit for the next day's hostilities. So they'd sent for the bands. Let music drown out the battlefield. Ganelon counted the sounds of three more bands on the night air. He wondered what the opposite word for "miracle" was, for he was surely witnessing it.

And there among the Sydenhams' bandsmen stood a man whose daguerreotype face Ganelon recognized from the padded covers of the old album on the piano back home. His great-grandfather held him with a long and mournful look before shaking his ghostly head and turning back to his clarinet.

Ganelon moved quickly down the communication trench, telling himself the aid station would still need help carrying the seriously wounded back to battalion hospital. But in fact something told him he must get the hell away from that place. As he hurried on he wondered what sins on earth had placed his great-grandfather, the amateur oboist, in what for him would have been a real purgatory among the single-reed instruments.

Then Ganelon came face-to-face with another ghost. The corporal stepped out from the parapet wall. "Yes, sir, I made it," he said, grinning vaguely. "Not many did. Not the captain. Not the general. So he wasn't crazy after all. And I reckon I saw that new lieutenant what's-his-name dead in every other shell hole." Ganelon heard the corporal's quiet laughter. He took the man's arm and tried to lead him to the aid station. But the corporal shook his hand away firmly and politely. Hefting the purse Ganelon had returned to him, he explained, "Got to wait for the others to divvy up, sir," he said. "There's got to be others."

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Just then Ganelon caught a snatch of Gilbert and Sullivan amid the jumble of band music. The tune sent him staggering recklessly through the darkness, deaf to the curses of the sleeping soldiers he jostled in his flight. Now he knew why he had to get away. Sooner or later the bands would run out of marches. Then the Germans would switch to Waldteufel and Strauss, the French would strike up Offenbach, and the British and the Canadians would play *Penzance* and *Pinafore*. Hymns and Christmas carols would be next.

Ganelon meant to be long out of earshot before the angels bent to earth to touch their harps of gold.

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THE PREACHER

by JOHN DOBBYN

Of all of the hell-raising foundries of sin
That were spawned in the Klondike's lap,

There was none that could usher more souls into Hell
Than the town of Hellvation Gap.

It was fueled by the liquor and stoked by the lust
Of the men who snatched gold from the throes

Of the ice-ridden, wind-driven land to the north,
Till it tickled the Devil's toes.

It was nearing the time when the sun goes to rest
For the awful black winter of night.

The days were cut down to a pittance of precious
Few hours of glorious light.

It was late afternoon. I can see it like day.
I don't think I forgot a detail.

We were most of us gathered in Crispy's Saloon,
At least those who could make last night's bail.

When the doors first swung in to the tall stranger's thrust,
There was no one that gave him a glance.

We were all but consumed with the women and drink,
And the music and tables of chance.

But he moved through that hall with the walk of a man
Who could stand toe-to-toe with the cream.

He was tall and filled-out like a man who had paid
With hard work for what others just dream.

It wasn't too long before every eye
In that raucous and crowded saloon

Was drawn to the man who was clothed all in black
Like a tide is just drawn by the moon.

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They spread him a swath in his path to the bar,
And he peeled the coat back from his chest.

We figured he must be a gamblin' man,
Till he pulled a black book from his vest.

He stood by the rail, and he slammed down the book
On the bar, and it hit with a crack.

The kid on the music box stopped in mid-tune,
And the rest of us sort of pulled back.

He turned, and we read in the scars on his face
Of a toughness that lay 'neath the tan.

Then we looked and we saw that the book in his hand
Was a Bible as scarred as the man.

He looked us all over, and sort of a grin
Took the edge off the crust of his face.

"They tell me your souls have been bargained to hell
And that's something no man can erase.

"Well, we'll see." He just dropped it and took off his coat,
Laying it and the book on the bar.

"I can lick any man in a bare-fisted fight.
Let's just see how be-deviled you are."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a poke
Of gold nuggets, as pure as you get.

Then his voice came up sharp, and the grin was no more,
When he laid down the terms of his bet.

"I'll fight any man, and if I should go down,
It buys drinks till the liquor is gone.

"But if I'm still on top when the fighting is done,
Then you'll all be in church comes the dawn."

The hush that crept in when he started to speak
Was now gone. We all pushed to be first.

We accepted the bet, 'cause the prospect of drinks
Filled the house with a rampageous thirst.

He handed the gold to a man at the bar,
And he stripped off his coat and his vest.

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He took in the grins on each face, one by one,
And he said, "Then let's go with your best."

We all looked around to the back of the room,
To the chair where he sat every night.

And we watched as the man that we knew as Big Jake
Dropped his coat and stood up for the fight.

He was tough as a bear, and fresh up from the creeks,
And if that doesn't mean much to you,

I can tell you that grizzlies and raw timber wolves
Are the things that they put in their stew.

Well they stood toe-to-toe for a minute or so,
Nothing fancy, just trading the blows.

How either one took it and stayed on his feet,
Is just something that God only knows.

It was painful to watch. They were no pretty sight.
But I'll tell you that under it all,

There was courage and grit and the stuff poets write,
In two men that were too proud to fall.

But fall one man did, while the other hung on,
And the fall nearly made the place quake.

The stranger stood grasping the lip of the bar,
And the man on the floor was Big Jake.

The stranger bent down, and he helped Big Jake up,
Then he turned to the rest of us there.

And he said that he'd see every last one in church.
We'd all wagered and lost. Fair was fair.

At dawn we assembled in Crispy's Saloon.
All the cards and the whiskey'd been stored.

It was not like your fine tabernacles down south,
But it served as the house of the Lord.

Crispy's old bar was the altar that day,
And the pulpit was two crates of booze.

When the stranger walked in, he looked fresh as a colt,
And he told us to sit where we'd choose.

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Then he started in quiet, and never got loud
Like some hell-fire preachers you hear.

But I noticed his words had a stronger effect
Than the threats of the railers of fear.

The words must have been like the ones that were spoke
By the shores of the Judean sea,

When the fisherman gave up his nets and walked after
The One who had said, "Follow me."

The months that came after were hard to explain.
The whole town went through sort of a change.

The high-rollin' hell-raisin' spirit was lost
In a peace that for our lot was strange.

The preacher'd come into the bars and saloons
Every night in his own quiet style.

And he somehow brought hope to each soul that he touched,
And we thought we saw God for a while.

The whiskey still flowed, but not quite like before,
And the girls of those raucous saloons

Somehow found they could live by an honest day's wage.
The whole town danced to different tunes.

Well, now, not the whole town, there were men like John Crisp,
Who saw Crispy's Saloon going down.

And a handful of others who'd dance in the streets,
If the preacher packed up and left town.

In the spring, when the sun nosed up over the peaks
To light up a few hours 'round noon,

We most of us pitched in to put up a church
Just across from old Crispy's Saloon.

Every couple of weeks, I noticed the preacher
Would hitch up the dogs and ride on.

In a few days at most, he'd ride back into town
And not one of us knew where he'd gone.

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Until one day he came to the shop where I worked.
You see, I was a blacksmith by trade,

And he laid down a sackful of nuggets of gold
With the plans for a piece to be made.

He said he'd bring more every trip to the north,
And he'd add what he brought to the rest,

Till he'd gathered enough for a great cross of gold,
To be fixed on the church as a crest.

As the springtime wore on, the town was still cased
In the usual coffin of snow,

As the daylight increased, he made more frequent trips,
Though I still never knew where he'd go.

He was close to us all, but we came to be friends
Even closer than all of the rest.

And it pained me to sense as the days hurried on
That he seemed to be more and more pressed.

He told me he figured he'd not live past spring,
So he doubled his trips for the gold.

I worked with him now every night on the cross,
As the preacher constructed the mold.

When we finally finished, we hauled it on ropes
To the roof where the whole street's in sight.

And he fixed it himself with the care of a man
Who is driven to set it just right.

Then I couldn't believe it. He covered it up
With a tarp that he'd brought from below.

He asked if I'd promise to take off the tarp.
I asked when, and he said that I'd know.

In the morning, he hitched up the dogs and rode out.
He had told me the evening before

That he needed to make one more trip to the mine
To close up and to fetch one more store.

It was three days from then, I was walking back home
With the afternoon's chill on my mind

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When I saw the faint outline of dogs and a sled,
Coming in with no driver behind.

I pulled up the dogs, and I ran to the sled.
I was sweating and still I was chilled.

I looked at the form huddled deep in the sled,
And I knew that the preacher'd been killed.

There were holes in his parka, stained crimson and wet,
And he felt awful cold to the touch.

I lifted his head and I saw in his eyes
A flicker of life, though not much.

I asked him who did it. He struggled to speak,
But the sound, if he made one, was weak.

Then he lifted a finger to point at the church
Where the cross stood in shrouds on the peak.

It was all he could do, and I took it as a sign
Of the promise that had to be kept.

Then he passed to his maker in peaceful content,
And I've got to admit that I wept.

I figured he'd told me as plain as he could
It was time for unveiling the cross.

I climbed to the peak and my fingers just shook
As I pulled that old tarp with a toss.

The very next day, when I finished my chores,
I was walking to Crispy's Saloon.

I looked up at the cross, and I saw it reflect
The sun of the mid-afternoon.

I recalled how the last thing the preacher had done
Was to point where the cross was to be.

Then I followed the shaft of reflection of light,
And I knew what he'd hoped that we'd see.

The beam from the cross burned its way through the snow
On the sign over Crispy's Saloon.

And it layed the words bare like a beacon of guilt—
"John Crisp"—clear as sunlight at noon.

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I stood and I stared—at a loss what to do.
Then another soon stood by my side.

Before long, there were more, all with one single thought,
As the knowledge swept through like a tide.

I could see curtains part in a second-floor room,
And the face of John Crisp, like a ghost,

All pallid and ashen, appeared for a bit,
Then withdrew from the gathering host.

It was most of the town that stood watch all that night,
Not a lynch mob—we'd been that before,

But a gathering witness the preacher'd approve,
Asking justice of God—nothing more.

At daybreak, I noticed the light in the window
Kept burning though sun filled the room.

I walked up the stairs, and I opened the door,
And I saw how John Crisp met his doom.

He was hung by a halter you'd use for a dog.
And I saw scattered nuggets of gold.

I was sure that he'd taken the preacher's last load,
Like the thirty odd pieces of old.

For a while we were lost, 'cause he'd brought us so far.
Even me, I'd been tough as they come.

We had followed him blind. Now our leader was gone,
And his death sort of left us all numb.

But it didn't take long for the numbness to pass,
We all knew that he'd want us to rise.

And each one of us had to continue to climb
From the old ways we'd come to despise.

So I moved to a town worse than Hellvation Gap
And I asked God to grant me His grace,

When I said in a bar full of miners and thugs,
"I can lick any man in the place."

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. Vol. 102, No. 8, Whole No. 622, Mid-December 1993. Published every 28 days which includes special issues in March and October by Dell Magazines, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 a copy in the U.S.A., $3.25 in Canada. 1 year subscription $34.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $44.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649.

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POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN: 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send $3.50 to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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